



The *Mencius* from the Rhetorical Perspective: *Ideological and Literary Interpretations of the East Asian Confucian Classic*

Gyeongjeon-ui susahak: *Dong asia samguk-ui gyeonghak insik (Rhetoric in the Confucian Classics: Perceptions from the Three East Asian Nations)*. By Min Jung You. Seoul: Sungkyunkwan University Press, 2024. 479 pages. ISBN: 9791155506356.

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The Confucian classic *Mencius* 孟子 (*Maengja* in Korean) embodies both profound philosophical thought and distinctive literary value. Traditional scholarly research has predominantly focused on the text's ideological content and moral ideals, approaching it through two main frameworks: *uiri* 義理 (moral principles) and *hungo* 訓詁 (philological studies). However, recent developments in cross-cultural studies and stylistics have shifted scholarly attention toward the rhetorical dimensions of the *Mencius* text. Scholars now increasingly attempt to reinterpret the work from literary and rhetorical perspectives. Building on this academic trend, the author of this study approached the text from a rhetorical standpoint and conducted a detailed comparative analysis of the rhetorical interpretations of the *Mencius* in Korea, China, and Japan during the pre-modern period. This study highlights the unique role of rhetoric in the understanding and interpretation of the Confucian classics (pp. 45–67).

Building upon this rhetorical foundation, the core innovation of this book lies in its breakthrough of the methodological limitations that

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have long characterized traditional classical studies. The author explicitly points out that while scholars have traditionally approached classical interpretation through the dichotomous lens of principles and philology, in reality, as early as Dong Zhongshu's 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE) *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露 (Luxurious Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals), there were already interpretive examples focusing on the structural features of the texts—such as vocabulary arrangement, textual structure, and rhetorical techniques. Jung's study terms this approach, which emphasizes the rhetorical dimension of classical texts, "rhetorical classical interpretation." Its primary characteristics include a focus on vocabulary arrangement, textual composition, and expressive techniques, thereby enabling a deeper understanding of classical texts while simultaneously celebrating their literary value and treating them as exemplary models for writing.

Jung's study focuses on six major commentaries from China, Korea, and Japan as its primary analytical objects. These include, from Korea, *Maengja seogi* 孟子釋義 (Explanations of Mencius) of Yi Hwang 李滉 (1501–1570) and *Maengja chau* 孟子筭義 (Explanations of Mencius) of Wi Baekgyu 魏伯珪 (1727–1798); from China, *Mengzi jizhu* 孟子集注 (Collected Annotations on Mencius) of Zhuxi 朱熹 (1130–1200) and *Mengzi lunwen* 孟子論文 (Essays on Mencius) of Niu Yunzhen 牛運震 (1706–1758); and from Japan, *Mōshi ko yoshi* 孟子古義 (Ancient Meanings of Mencius) of Ito Jinsai 伊藤仁齋 (1627–1705) and *Doku Mōshi* 讀孟子 (Reading Mencius) of Hirose Tanso 廣瀬淡窓 (1782–1856). Drawing on these texts, the author offers a detailed rhetorical analysis of the interpretive methods employed in these commentaries. The study identifies four common characteristics that define the rhetorical approach to the *Mencius* across the three countries: (1) aesthetic appreciation and critical commentary on the *Mencius* text; (2) analysis of vocabulary arrangement, rhetorical techniques, and textual structure; (3) avoidance of employing classical allusions when discussing rhetorical features; and (4) a profound respect for both the literary and ideological value of the *Mencius*. These four characteristics form the basic criteria for defining rhetorical commentaries on the classics (pp. 45–67).

From the perspective of intellectual history, the influence of literary

theory on rhetorical interpretation is primarily reflected in the establishment of the canonical status of classical texts. Liu Xie's 劉勰 (465–?) theory of the *wenzhi xiangsheng* 文質相生 ('mutual generation of literature and substance'; *munjil sangsaeng* in Korean) emphasizes the balance between literary expression and ideological substance, while Han Yu's 韓愈 (768–824) notion of *wenyi zaidao* 文以載道 ('literature carrying the way'; *muni jaedo* in Korean) highlights the moral function of writing. These theoretical frameworks provided significant methodological guidance for subsequent scholars interpreting the *Mencius*, enabling them to attend to the literary value and rhetorical techniques of the text alongside its philosophical ideas (pp. 85–102).

Within this intellectual historical context, Jeong Dojeon's 鄭道傳 (1342–1398) and Seongheon's 成俔 (1439–1504) concept of *munbon eogyong* 文本於經 (text grounded in the classics) demonstrates the distinctive contribution of Korean Confucian scholars to the rhetorical interpretation of the Confucian classics. In his *Doeun munjipseo* 陶隱文集序 (Preface to the Collected Works of Taoyin), Jeong Dojeon asserts that *immun* 人文 (human culture) is based on the *do* 道 (Way), emphasizing that writing both embodies morality and possesses a transcendent power to govern heaven and earth. Unlike Yu Hyeop's emphasis on the "natural Way," Jeong Dojeon's conception of the Way focuses more strongly on its moral dimension (p. 92). Seongheon, in turn, explicitly asserts that the Six Classics embody the words and deeds of the sages and serve as the origin of all literary forms. By incorporating both the *Mencius* and *Noneo* 論語 (*Analects*) into the category of "classics," he advocates for the unity of the Way and literature, thus laying the foundation for rhetorical studies of the Confucian classics (pp. 96–100). Together, these theories resonate with the literary frameworks of Yu Hyeop and Han Yu, collectively enriching the East Asian Confucian rhetorical tradition.

Against this background, Korean Confucian scholars' rhetorical interpretations of the *Mencius* classic reveal a distinctive feature of rhetorical ethicization. This characteristic is vividly illustrated in the commentarial practices of Yi Hwang and Wi Baekgyu. Yi Hwang's *Maengja seogi*

systematically employs rhetorical elements as essential tools for scriptural interpretation through meticulous analysis on three levels: grammar, semantics, and rhetorical force. In his analysis of rhetorical force, Yi Hwang particularly emphasizes the natural structure of the scripture as a vehicle for conveying philosophical meaning. For instance, in interpreting the passage, “Above there is no moral standard; below there is no legal protection,” Yi elucidates the internal logic of political ethics by analyzing the parallelism within the sentence structure, thereby demonstrating an integrated understanding of textual structure and ideological content (pp. 227–229). Similarly, when analyzing the phrase “*yuinuihaeng bihaenginuiya*” 由仁義行 非行仁義也 (acting from benevolence and righteousness, not merely practicing benevolence and righteousness), he highlights human moral subjectivity by distinguishing between subject and object, thereby steering grammatical analysis toward the core concerns of ethical practice (pp. 229–231).

Wi Baekgyu’s *Maengja chaudi* advances this rhetorical ethicization to a mature stage. Wi Baekgyu not only inherits Yi Hwang’s focus on the three rhetorical elements, but also innovatively develops methods for revealing “*eonoe yeonui*” 言外衍義 (extended meanings beyond words) through an analysis of textual structure. His work delves deeply into the dialogical contexts and cognitive content underlying the text (p. 259). Through a systematic examination of rhetorical techniques—including questioning methods, exemplification, and metaphor—Wi Baekgyu elucidates the expressive strategies of the *Mencius*’s thought of “*chui*” 推仁 (extending benevolence). This approach highlights the profound integration of rhetorical technique with Neo-Confucian thought (pp. 260–261). Of particular note is Wi Baekgyu’s focus on chapter composition and organizational methods, which expands rhetorical analysis to the macro-structural level. Through a careful examination of the editorial logic of the entire *Mencius*, he reveals the systematic and hierarchical nature of Mengzi’s thought (pp. 265–268).

The emergence of distinctive rhetorical interpretive methods among Korean Confucian scholars during the Joseon period has deep historical and cultural roots. As an integral part of the Sinitic cultural sphere, Korea grappled with a unique linguistic landscape marked by a pronounced

separation between spoken and written language. This linguistic duality therefore compelled Korean Confucian scholars to devote heightened attention to the *decoding* of classical texts in their interpretive practices (pp. 231–232). Following the establishment of the Joseon dynasty, the political imperative to assert the orthodoxy of Confucianism, coupled with the development of Korean prose theory in the 17th and 18th centuries, provided fertile intellectual ground for the refinement of these rhetorical interpretive strategies (p. 232). By intertwining rhetorical analysis with ethical exegesis, Joseon Confucian scholars not only upheld the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy of Jujahak 朱子學 (Neo-Confucianism) but also forged unique interpretive frameworks that reflected their own intellectual sensibilities. This synthesis suggests their profound commitment to integrating the philosophical content of classical texts with their literary form, thereby contributing to the rich legacy of Confucian scholarship in Korea.

Zhuxi's *Mengzi jizhu* and Niu Yunzhen's *Mengzi lunwen* exhibit a distinctive feature of “equal emphasis on moral principles and rhetorical style.” The *Mengzi jizhu* demonstrates a prominent characteristic of “*wenli jianbei*” 文理兼备 (balance of rhetoric and logic), gradually unfolding the internal logic of Confucian classics through adjustments in sentence structures and word order. It not only attends to the etymological interpretation of terms but also emphasizes the elucidation of moral principles and the deep philosophical reflection they inspire (p. 167). In contrast, the *Mengzi lunwen* focuses on the analysis of *yushi* 語勢 (rhetorical force), capturing the force and aesthetic quality of language. It highlights that the value of classical texts lies not only in their ideological content but also in the artistic expressiveness of their language. This dual focus reinforces the textual richness of Confucian writings and situates them as both philosophical and literary treasures.

Hirose Tanso's *Doku Mōshi* and Ito Jinsai's *Mōshi ko yoshi* exemplify a distinctive inclination toward “structural analysis and logical reconstruction.” *Doku Mōshi* particularly foregrounds syntax (*munbeop* 文法 in Korean) analysis, attending closely to sentence structure and logical coherence. This

focus underscores the critical function of these formal elements in enhancing the persuasiveness and rhetorical force of the text (p. 202). Likewise, *Mōshi ko yoshi* reflects the sustained interest of Japanese Confucian scholars in the structural analysis of classical texts, employing meticulous deconstruction of linguistic forms to achieve a precise and faithful understanding of ideological content.

Through its in-depth analysis of *Mencius* commentaries from China, Korea, and Japan, this study reveals a significant phenomenon: although those countries share the same Confucian canonical text, they have developed distinctly different ideological landscapes and interpretive trajectories due to their divergent approaches to textual form. The rhetorical interpretations of Confucian classics in the 17th and 18th centuries reflect the profound efforts of intellectuals in these countries to fundamentally reconsider and challenge established ideological systems. Pre-modern scholars, committed to the academic tradition of grounding thought in the classics, often used commentaries as a crucial outlet for expressing their inner anxieties and theoretical uncertainties. Within this historical context, the relationship between thought and rhetoric emerges as a complex and profound interaction. At the core of this interplay lies the intellectual mode of “text grounded in the classics,” which functions as the key mechanism driving this dynamic relationship between thought and rhetoric.

Confucian scholars from China, Korea, and Japan regarded the Confucian classics as the highest exemplars of literary creation. They engaged deeply with texts such as the *Mencius*, meticulously studying their rhetorical techniques and textual structures to uncover their literary qualities, which they then applied to their own writing practices. This scholarly endeavor was widespread among intellectuals of the time and exemplifies the dual function of classical texts in both ideological transmission and literary composition. Jung argues that classical texts’ pervasive use of rhetorical analysis offers crucial academic grounds for re-examining the value and function of these classics as literary canons. Such an approach enables research to transcend the stale debate over whether Confucian classics should be classified as philosophical works. Instead, it encourages scholars to appreciate the multifaceted roles of these texts within premodern East Asian classical studies,

illuminating their significance from diverse disciplinary perspectives (p. 348). Although this book has achieved significant breakthroughs in methodological innovation, there remains ample room for further exploration in uncovering its intellectual-historical dimensions. As the author rightly points out, future research should integrate historical contextual analysis, cultural background studies, and philosophical inquiry to develop a multidimensional interpretive framework for the *Mencius*. Such a framework would overcome the limitations of a purely rhetorical reading and fully illuminate the ideological complexity inherent in the text (p. 215).

First, in analyzing the characteristic of rhetorical ethicization in Korean Confucianism, the author primarily approaches the subject from a linguistic perspective. However, the unique political and cultural context of the Joseon Dynasty—particularly the Sinocentric worldview that emphasized loyalty to the Ming dynasty and rejected the Qing dynasty, alongside the tradition of implementing Neo-Confucianism in politics—deserves deeper intellectual-historical investigation to better understand how it specifically influenced the interpretive methods of Confucian scholars such as Yi Hwang and Wi Baekgyu. This distinctive rhetorical interpretive approach actually reflects the ideological self-awareness of Korean Confucianism in its effort to uphold the legitimacy of the orthodox Confucian transmission.

Second, the intellectual-historical contexts underlying the divergent rhetorical interpretations among scholars in China, Korea, and Japan merit further clarification. The Chinese scholarly tradition that emphasizes both moral principle and rhetorical expression derives from Song dynasty Neo-Confucian innovations in classical hermeneutics, while the Japanese inclination towards structural analysis and logical reconstruction is closely linked to the academic orientation of the Edo-period Ancient Learning school. These different rhetorical interpretive approaches essentially reflect each country's Confucianism making distinct ideological choices and theoretical strategies in response to their own cultural circumstances.

Furthermore, the book's discussion of the relationship between rhetoric and ideological content could be enriched by connecting it to broader intellectual trends in East Asia during the 17th and 18th centuries. This

period represented a critical juncture in which traditional Confucianism faced both internal crises and external challenges. The rise of rhetorical interpretation during this time may have been not only an innovation in scholarly method but also an important attempt by Confucian thought to seek new modes of expression and transmission strategies for a new era. Such an in-depth intellectual-historical exploration would contribute to a deeper understanding of the unique value and historical significance of rhetorical interpretation within the development of East Asian Confucianism.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, this book opens new academic perspectives for the study of Confucianism. It not only highlights the artistic value of the *Mencius* as a literary classic but also demonstrates both the theoretical potential and the practical challenges of cross-cultural comparative research. By adopting the research perspective of “methodological East Asia,” the author effectively avoids the limitations of previous single-country studies and instead provides academia with an innovative paradigm for classical studies. This approach contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the diversity and unity of Confucian traditions within the East Asian cultural sphere. Moreover, it reveals the deep interconnections between classical studies and literature, demonstrating the complex cognitive structure of pre-modern East Asian intellectuals who simultaneously regarded the classics as both ideological exemplars and literary canons. This book thus holds significant methodological value for advancing comparative studies of Confucianism in East Asia and offers a valuable analytical framework for future research.