

The *Mozi* as an Evolving Text

Different Voices in Early Chinese Thought

Edited by

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HOW TO END WARS WITH WORDS: THREE ARGUMENTATIVE
STRATEGIES BY MOZI AND HIS FOLLOWERS*

Paul van Els

竊鉤者誅，竊國者爲諸侯

Those who steal buckles get to be punished;
those who steal states get to be feudal lords.

—Zhuangzi

Mozi 墨子 (fifth century BCE) and his followers were active in the socially and politically tumultuous era in Chinese history that has come to be known as the Warring States period (fifth to third centuries BCE). Warfare naturally informs many aspects of their ideas and practices. From a genuine concern for the well-being of the common people, whose lives were endangered by the ongoing conflicts, they developed arguments against military aggression between states, they presented these arguments to belligerent heads of state, hoping to dissuade them from launching attacks, and they came to the rescue of weaker cities and states under attack, offering their knowledge of defense tactics and weaponry. Our main source for Mohist ideas and practices is the *Mozi*, in which warfare

* This essay was written under the financial support of a grant from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). It studies three chapters in the *Mozi* 墨子 that were probably, as Graham puts it (*Disputers of the Tao*, 35), “written down from a common oral tradition which may or may not go back to the discourses of Mo-tzu [Mozi] himself.” Their obscure provenance notwithstanding, I ascribe the views expressed in these chapters to “Mozi,” because so does the Chinese text. In so doing, I do not suggest that the views can be traced to a historical Mozi, nor do I want to bypass the complex textual history of the *Mozi*. My motivation is merely aesthetic: “Mozi argues” is more pleasing to the eye than “those who created this *Mozi* passage argue,” even if the latter reflects the necessary historical prudence. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations in this essay are my own. They are based on a Dutch translation of the three *Mozi* chapters that I made in collaboration with Burchard Mansvelt Beck. When retranslating select passages into English for this paper, I consulted the translations of Mei, *The Ethical and Political Works of Motse*; Watson, *Mo-tzu, Basic Writings*; and Johnston, *The “Mozi.”* I am indebted to their work but do not systematically indicate where my translations draw upon or deviate from theirs. I presented earlier versions of this essay in Leiden, Bonn, and Oxford, and I am thankful for all questions and comments received at those meetings. I am also grateful to Katia Chirkova, Carine Defoort, Chris Fraser, Ting-mien Lee, Hui-chieh Loy, Nicolas Standaert, Griet Vankeerberghen, and Sara Vantournhout, who read earlier versions of this essay and provided insightful comments and suggestions.

is a recurrent topic. To give a few examples: Three chapters, all titled “Fei gong” 非攻 (Against Military Aggression), fervidly condemn offensive warfare (*Mozi* 17–19). Another chapter narrates how Mozi walked for ten days and nights to dissuade the king of one state from attacking another state (*Mozi* 50). And the final chapters of the book, with titles such as “Bei ti” 備梯 (Preparing against Ladders), give detail on the technical aspects of city defense (*Mozi* 52–71).¹ This essay focuses on the three “Against Military Aggression” chapters, that is, on the theoretical foundation rather than the practical application of the Mohists’ military views.

“Fei gong” is known as one of the ten core doctrines of Mozi and his group. In the received *Mozi*, these ten basic teachings are presented in the so-called Triplet chapters, each triplet consisting of three distinct chapters with both similarities and differences in wording and reasoning. As one of the most prominent teachings of the Mohists, the “against military aggression” doctrine features prominently in current publications on the *Mozi*. Scholars often quote freely from one or more of the three chapters, so as to present a coherent description of Mozi’s stance on warfare. Such descriptions usually treat the three chapters as one homogeneous unit and pay no attention to the differences between them.² Other scholars focus specifically on the differences between the three chapters, so as to explain the extraordinary threefold structure of the ten Mohist core doctrines and the complex relationship between the chapters in each triplet. One explanation, the “three-sects theory,” holds that the Triplets were written by three different groups of Mozi’s followers. Another explanation, currently more popular, is the “sequence theory,” which sees a temporal development between the chapters in each triplet. Both explanations rely mainly (though not exclusively) on textual evidence: differences in wording, grammatical patterns, and so on.³ Besides textual differences, however, there are also notable conceptual differences within the Triplets. These

¹ For more on these chapters, see Yates, “The Mohists on Warfare”; or Johnston’s translation, *The “Mozi,”* 731–921.

² For examples, see Mei, *Motse: The Neglected Rival of Confucius*, 94–102; or Geisser, *Mo Ti*, 77–79. More recently, Fu, *China’s Legalists*, 30, sums up Mozi’s doctrine of nonaggression by simply saying that war does not “bring any benefit but only impose[s] hardship on the common people.” Similarly, Nivison, “The Classical Philosophical Writings,” 763, summarizes the three chapters in a couple of lines, glossing over any differences between them, to present the Mohists as “pacifists of a sort.”

³ In his study of grammatical features and differences in wording between the Core Chapters, Graham, *Divisions in Early Mohism*, proposes the three-sects theory. In more recent studies, others argue for a sequence theory instead: A. Taeko Brooks, “The Mician Ethical Chapters”; A. Taeko Brooks, “The Fragment Theory of MZ 14, 17 and 20”; Fraser,

receive little attention in the literature. For example, only a handful of scholars note that the three “Fei gong” chapters contain different arguments and possibly address different audiences.⁴ Such important observations regarding the conceptual differences in the “Fei gong” triplet are often made in a much broader *Mozi* context (such as an encyclopedia entry on Mozi’s thought or the introduction to a translation of the *Mozi*). In my view, these inspiring publications signal the need for a systematic study of the different lines of argumentation in this triplet. This essay is an attempt to meet this need.

My study of *Mozi* chapters 17, 18, and 19 proceeds from two preliminary considerations:

1. I treat the three chapters as distinct textual units. This is not self-evident. Words, phrases, and even entire passages in these chapters are corrupt, and a few phrases or passages occur with minor differences in more than one chapter. Moreover, it has been suggested (and persuasively refuted) that *Mozi* 17 was originally part of another chapter, *Mozi* 26; and there is evidence that *Mozi* 19 contains different layers, some written earlier than others.⁵ These complexities notwithstanding, each of the three chapters displays a remarkable conceptual coherence, a clear line of argumentation, which indicates that the chapters form closed textual units in the eyes of whoever created them, be they Mozi, his followers, or later editors.
2. I discuss the three chapters in what the majority of scholars now consider to be their chronological order: First *Mozi* 17, which is the oldest chapter; then *Mozi* 18, which is somewhat younger; and finally *Mozi* 19, which is the youngest of the three.⁶ Notably, this sequential order,

“Doctrinal Developments in the *Mozi* 墨子 Jian ai 兼愛 Triad”; Desmet, “The Growth of Compounds in the Core Chapters of the *Mozi*.”

⁴ For descriptions of different arguments in these chapters, see Lowe, *Mo Tzu’s Religious Blueprint for a Chinese Utopia*, 107–115; A. Taeko Brooks, “Mwòdž 17–79 非攻 ‘Against War’”; Loy, “Mozi (Mo-tzu) (c. 400s–300s BCE)”; and Johnston, *The “Mozi,”* xlvii–xlix. Some suggest that these chapters were written for different audiences: Brooks, “MZ 17–19”; Fraser, “Is MZ 17 a Fragment of MZ 26?,” 124; and Loy, “Mozi (Mo-tzu) (c. 400s–300s BCE).”

⁵ *Mozi* 17 does not start with the standard formula “Our Master Mozi, says” 子墨子曰 (or 子墨子言曰), which is one of the reasons why Graham, *Divisions in Early Mohism*, 3–4, argues that *Mozi* 17 was originally part of another chapter, *Mozi* 26. Fraser, “Is MZ 17 a Fragment of MZ 26?,” 122–123 persuasively refutes Graham’s argument. For a textual analysis of *Mozi* 19, showing different layers, see Desmet, “All Good Things Come in Threes,” 124–146.

⁶ This sequential order is quite plausible, if only because the three chapters in this order display an increased use of grammatical compounds, which accords with broader

however plausible, is not pertinent to my argument, for my primary concern is not the historical relationship of these chapters but the conceptual differences between them.

A quick glance at the three chapters shows striking differences. One crucial difference is their usage of the term “to attack” (*gong* 攻).⁷ In *Mozi* 17, the term occurs a mere three times. All three occurrences are in the verb-object construction “to attack a state” (*gong guo* 攻國). In *Mozi* 18, the term occurs about two dozen times. Aside from a few occurrences in verb-object constructions (such as “to attack the state of Qi” 攻齊), most occurrences are in the noun phrase “warfare marked by attack” (*gong zhan* 攻戰), “military aggression” or “offensive warfare” in a more natural translation). This suggests that *Mozi* 18 condemns, not merely the practice of one state attacking another state, but the conceptualized idea of offensive warfare, possibly as distinct from other types of warfare. In *Mozi* 19, the term likewise occurs nearly two dozen times. This chapter also argues against offensive warfare, but the preferred terminology here is not “warfare marked by attack” (*gong zhan* 攻戰) (which occurs not even once), but “to attack and to strike” (*gong fa* 攻伐). This shift in the choice of terminology possibly suggests that the chapters were created by different people, or different groups of people, who do not necessarily approach warfare from exactly the same angle.

Not only do the three chapters differ in their usage of “to attack,” but other recurrent terms likewise vary. Some keywords appear frequently in one chapter but hardly or not at all in the other chapters, as this table shows:⁸

linguistic trends of that period. (See Desmet, “The Growth of Compounds in the Core Chapters of the *Mozi*,” on the value of such compounds as criteria for dating texts.) This sequence also explains the increasing length of the chapters (17 shortest, 18 intermediate, 19 longest) and the amplified opposition to Mozi’s ideas (no opponents in chapter 17 to fierce debate in chapter 19). And finally, the sequence explains the shift in the use of the term “to benefit” (*li* 利), from a negative, selfish benefit in *Mozi* 17 to a positive, altruistic benefit in *Mozi* 19, a shift that is also witnessed in *Mozi* 14–16, the “Inclusive Care” triplet that is closely related to the “Against Military Aggression” triplet. (For more on the term “to profit/benefit,” see Fraser, “Doctrinal Developments in the *Mozi* 墨子 ‘Jian’ai’ 兼愛 Triad,” 4; or Defoort, “The Profit That Does Not Profit.”).

⁷ This term is also rendered as “offensive warfare” or “military aggression” in English.

⁸ I noted these keywords in the course of translating the three chapters, for they appear to stand out as terminology specific to each of these chapters. The table lists only the absolute frequencies of the keywords. If we adjust these frequencies for the relative sizes of the three chapters (roughly 1:3:5), the differences would be even more salient. Notably, the frequency of the word “to count” (*shu* 數) does not include its occurrences in the

Keywords	<i>Mozi</i> 17	<i>Mozi</i> 18	<i>Mozi</i> 19
“humaneness” (<i>ren</i> 仁)	4	—	2
“righteousness” (<i>yi</i> 義)	21	—	9
“to harm others” (<i>kui ren</i> 虧人)	6	—	—
“crime” (<i>zui</i> 罪)	6	—	2
“to calculate” (<i>ji</i> 計)	—	5	1
“to count” (<i>shu</i> 數)	—	8	4
“countless” (<i>bu ke sheng shu</i> 不可勝數)	—	9	2
“ghosts” (<i>gui</i> 鬼)	—	1	11
“spirits” (<i>shen</i> 神)	—	1	9
“Heaven” (<i>tian</i> 天)	—	—	25

These keywords are interesting for two reasons: (1) Their different frequencies of occurrence are revealing. Keywords typical for *Mozi* 17 are absent in *Mozi* 18, and vice versa, and *Mozi* 19 contains some keywords from both *Mozi* 17 and *Mozi* 18 but also features keywords that do not appear in the other two chapters. This possibly suggests that the first two chapters were created independently of each other, and that the third chapter may have been created with one or both of the other chapters in mind. (2) The keywords within each chapter by and large belong to the same semantic field. As such, the combination of keywords in each chapter appears to represent one theme, or one topic of argumentation.

More specifically, *Mozi* 17 repeatedly speaks of humaneness and righteousness, it worries about the harm done to people, and it labels warfare a crime. This suggests that the chapter approaches warfare from the angle of what is morally right or wrong. I call this the “moral argument.” *Mozi* 18 is all about counting and calculating, as it quantifies the costs and benefits of a military campaign. I call this the “economic argument.” *Mozi* 19 speaks of ghosts and spirits and repeatedly claims that warfare harms the interests of Heaven. I call this the “religious argument.” In sum, the keywords suggest that the Mohists did not uphold just one argument against military aggression. Instead, they actively pursued different lines of argumentation, possibly to persuade different audiences.

In the following sections I shall individually discuss each of the three lines of argumentation, with extensive reference to the original text in

formulaic expression “countless” (*bu ke sheng shu* 不可勝數), and the frequency of the word “Heaven” (*tian* 天) does not include its occurrences in the formula “All under Heaven” (*tianxia* 天下), in this essay also translated as “the world”.

translation. I explore what the argument in each of the three chapters entails, to whom it may have been addressed, and how persuasive it is from a modern academic perspective. To contextualize the three lines of argumentation, I occasionally refer to other parts of the *Mozi* and to other early Chinese politico-philosophical writings. In the final section, I give examples of how these arguments were used in practice, at least according to the anecdotes in the latter part of the received *Mozi*. My ultimate goal is to show how the Mohists actively adapted their argumentative strategies so as to find the best words to end wars.

The Moral Argument

The first of the three “Fei gong” chapters, *Mozi* 17, is a short essay that criticizes unprovoked military offensives between states and specifically targets “the gentlemen of the world” 天下之君子 for rejoicing about such practices. In this chapter, Mozi unilaterally expresses his views; opponents are not given the opportunity to respond. In plain words and clear logic, Mozi rejects military aggression as unethical, or even criminal. His rhetorical tour de force opens with a step-by-step argument that leads from minor offenses to major felony and eventually to the inevitable conclusion that warfare is the worst of all crimes:

今有一人，入人園圃，竊其桃李。衆聞則非之。上爲政者得則罰之。此何也？以虧人自利也。至攘人犬豕雞豚者。其不義又甚入人園圃竊桃李。是何故也？以虧人愈多。苟虧人愈多，其不仁茲甚，罪益厚。至入人欄廄，取人馬牛者。其不義又甚攘人犬豕雞豚。此何故也？以其虧人愈多。苟虧人愈多，其不仁茲甚，罪益厚。至殺不辜人也，拖其衣裘、取戈劍者。其不義又甚入人欄廄取人馬牛。此何故也？以其虧人愈多。苟虧人愈多。其不仁茲甚矣，罪益厚。當此，天下之君子皆知而非之，謂之不義。今至大爲攻國，則弗知非。從而譽之，謂之義。此何謂知義與不義之別乎？

Suppose you enter someone's orchard and pick a peach or a plum. When the people hear about it, they will condemn it. When the authorities catch you, they will punish you. Why? Because you harm the other to benefit yourself.

Now suppose you seize someone's dog, pig, chicken, or piglet. This unrighteous act is worse than picking a peach or a plum from someone's orchard. Why? Because you cause greater harm to the other. The greater harm you cause to the other, the greater your lack of humaneness and the graver your crime.

And now suppose you enter someone's stable and seize a horse or an ox. This unrighteous act is even worse than seizing someone's dog, pig, chicken,

or piglet. Why? Because you cause greater harm to the other. The greater harm you cause to the other, the greater your lack of humaneness and the graver your crime.

And finally, suppose you kill an innocent man, strip him of his fur coat, and appropriate his spear or sword. This unrighteous act is far worse than entering someone's stable and seizing a horse or an ox. Why? Because you cause far greater harm to the other. The greater harm you cause to the other, the greater your lack of humaneness and the graver your crime.

Up to this point, the gentlemen of the world know enough to condemn such acts and brand them as unrighteous. Yet when it comes to the gravest act of attacking other states, they do not know enough to condemn it. Instead, they applaud it and call it righteous. How can we say they know the difference between righteous and unrighteous? (17: 30/17–24)

This passage is immediately followed by a similar line of argumentation, in which the crime of murder increases in gravity:

殺一人謂之不義，必有一死罪矣。若以此說往：殺十人十重不義，必有十死罪矣；殺百人百重不義，必有百死罪矣。當此，天下之君子皆知而非之，謂之不義。今至大爲不義攻國，則弗知非。從而譽之，謂之義。

If you kill a man, you are branded as unrighteous and must pay for this crime with your own life. Reasoning along these lines: if you kill ten people, you are ten times as unrighteous and should pay for these crimes with ten lives; and if you kill a hundred people, you are a hundred times as unrighteous and should pay for these crimes with a hundred lives.

Up to this point, the gentlemen of the world know enough to condemn such acts and brand them as unrighteous. Yet when it comes to the gravest form of unrighteousness, attacking other states, they do not know enough to condemn it. Instead, they applaud it and call it righteous. (17: 30/26–28)

The first of these two passages opens with the observation that even minor offenses, such as stealing fruit, are widely recognized as both reprehensible and punishable, because such offenses contravene the public's sense of justice and breach the laws. Those who commit petty larceny enrich themselves at the cost of others, which is why "the people" (*zhong* 衆) condemn the theft and "the authorities" (*shang wei zheng zhe* 上爲政者) punish the thief. With both the people and the authorities on his side, it is virtually impossible to disagree with the very foundation of Mozi's moral argument. Moreover, each new step in these two passages follows seemingly logically from the preceding step: from fruit, to small animals, to larger animals, and so on; from one person, to ten people, and so on. This means that whoever agrees with the foundation of Mozi's argument must also accept the conclusion. That is, whoever rejects small crimes

must also reject larger crimes and ultimately reject warfare as the worst of all crimes.

Some of Mozi's contemporaries nonetheless fail to follow his argument all the way through. They do not take the ultimate step of rejecting warfare. Mozi accuses these people, whom he disdainfully refers to as "the gentlemen of the world," of applying double standards: they condemn minor wrongdoings but support what he considers the gravest wrongdoing of all. Such people are obviously "confused in their moral judgment," as Lowe notes.⁹

Who are these morally confused gentlemen of the world? Robins identifies them as "men distinguished by their social and political power," whose group includes "rulers and other members of the nobility, though probably many were not strictly noble."¹⁰ The ruling elites upheld views and customs that Mozi and his followers, emerging from outside the elite circles, criticized as unserviceable to the well-being of the common people. Robins convincingly shows that the elites are the main opponents of the Mohists, at least in the early stages of their movement. As such, the elites also serve as the main addressees of *Mozi 17*. Clues in this chapter help us determine more specifically who these men were and what it was about them that bothered Mozi and his group. With a hint of sarcasm, the chapter discusses the views of the gentlemen of the world on military aggression:

情不知其不義也，故書其言以遺後世。若知其不義也，夫奚說書其不義以遺後世哉？

They must truly fail to see how unrighteous it is, for they commit their words to writing, so as to hand on to later generations. If they knew how unrighteous it is, then how do we explain that they commit this kind of unrighteousness to writing, so as to hand on to later generations? (17: 30/28–29)

Evidently, while *Mozi 17* condemns the unprovoked aggression between states, more importantly it criticizes people who fail to condemn such aggression—that is, people who write about the glory of warfare and fail to see the injustice of it. In all likelihood, the "words committed to writing" in this passage refer to the records kept by the elites about their deeds and achievements, in which they note for posterity, presumably without the slightest bit of guilt, how their clan fought and won wars. Hence, in

⁹ Lowe, *Mo Tzu's Religious Blueprint for a Chinese Utopia*, 109.

¹⁰ Robins, "The Moists and the Gentlemen of the World," 386.

my view, this chapter mainly argues against an elite culture that upholds a self-sustaining rationale that justifies or even encourages war.

Mozi's moral argument aims to counter the prevalent hawkish rationale by rejecting the commonly made distinction between crime and war. He claims that war is no different from ordinary crime, only graver. This is a novel idea in the context in which Mozi and his followers operated. Many thinkers in those days, such as Confucius and Mencius, were critical of warfare but they never branded it a crime. The idea is also revolutionary in that it puts the ruler on a par with his people. In Mozi's view, moral standards and criminal laws apply to both the people and their ruler, and whoever breaches the law shall be punished. There are, however, two problems with this argument.

The first problem is that while this chapter condemns the practice of one state "attacking another state," it does not explain what this means nor does it distinguish between different possible motives for attacking. This lack of precision, combined with the forceful tone of the argument, easily leads to the impression that Mozi rejects all kinds of warfare, an impression shared by some of his and some of our contemporaries.¹¹ But even without a definition of "to attack," the parallel lines of argumentation in this chapter allow us to infer what is meant by the term. Similar to entering someone's premises to steal fruit or animals or taking someone's life to steal clothes or weapons, Mozi here speaks of entering someone's state and willfully sacrificing human lives for the purpose of gaining booty or territory. In the first line of argumentation, Mozi explicitly condemns the killing of "an innocent person." The word "innocent" seems redundant here, as one would normally find any robbery with murder reprehensible, whether or not the victim has a clean slate. That Mozi explicitly criticizes the killing of innocent people implies that he exclusively condemns attacks on "innocent" states, that is, states led by rulers who pose no threat to their own population or to the region. Notably, Mozi does not mention defensive warfare or condemn wars against "guilty" states. In fact, I would even argue that Mozi is not ill-disposed toward the latter. The opening lines of *Mozi* 17 clearly state that authorities punish guilty people, such as those who steal fruit. By extension, it seems that guilty rulers may likewise be punished. Hence, the chapter can be said to contain implicit support

¹¹ For Mozi's contemporaries, see the opponents mentioned in this chapter. For our contemporaries, see, e.g., Fu, *China's Legalists*, 30, who straightforwardly labels Mozi "an active pacifist."

for military action against rogue states, even when it explicitly brands any other kind of military aggression as a crime.

The second and related problem is that Mozi accuses the ruling elites of inappropriately distinguishing between crime, which they condemn, and war, which they applaud. Mozi argues that stealing goods and attacking states are essentially the same and merely differ in the degree of harm inflicted upon others. But there may be a reason why people distinguish between the two. Crime normally takes place within the context of one state and can be handled by the judiciary system of that state. A magistrate decides if someone should be punished for stealing fruit or not. But who decides whether or not the attack on a state is justified? And more importantly, who is capable of enforcing punishment if the attack is decided to be unjustified? In cross-border conflicts, when the judiciary systems of individual states fall short, there is need for a universal and objective entity that is above both adversaries. In Mozi's day, the Zhou clan was no longer able to serve as arbiter. Conversely, the waning power of their dynasty had given rise to the armed competition among subordinate states that were vying to succeed the Zhou. While Mozi loathes the hawkish rhetoric and endless battles that dominated his days, in *Mozi 17* he does not identify a universal and objective judiciary entity that is capable of deciding whether an attack is a justifiable punishment of a rogue state or a loathsome expedition for more goods or grounds. Without this universal and objective judiciary body, Mozi can only appeal to the ruling elites' sense of humaneness and righteousness, in the hope that they extend the moral standards that are effective in their state to their relation with other states. Given the hawkish attitude that Mozi identifies among "the gentlemen of the world," this appeal probably yielded little result.

The Economic Argument

The second of the three "Fei gong" chapters, *Mozi 18*, is an essay of intermediate size that includes counterarguments by those who resist Mozi's opposition to offensive warfare. These opponents are not named, nor are they referred to as "the gentlemen of the world." Instead, they are labeled as "those who put a pleasing façade upon military aggression" (*shi gong zhan zhe* 飾攻戰者). It is unclear if these opponents were actual historical figures or fictional characters made up for rhetorical purposes by Mozi and his followers. Either way, their counterarguments lead to heated discussion in this chapter.

The chapter opens and closes with quotations of ancient sayings. For example: “when the plan you made does not work, then observe the past to know what is ahead and observe the visible to know what is hidden” 謀而不得，則以往知來，以見知隱 (18: 31/9–10). One man’s fault may be another man’s lesson, these sayings appear to say, as they encourage people to learn from past mistakes. This emphasis on the past leads some scholars to see the argument in this chapter as historical.¹² The chapter is indeed interspersed with historical anecdotes. Then again, so is the next chapter (*Mozi* 19). Moreover, the function of the anecdotes in this chapter is to illustrate a more fundamental idea, namely that warfare is an extravagant waste of resources.

Chapter 18 does not address the morally confused elites (as does *Mozi* 17) but specifically targets those who make plans for the state (as in the ancient saying quoted above) and who are in a position to decide whether or not to go to war. In trying to argue policy makers out of engaging in warfare, this chapter does not mention abstract ethical notions such as “humaneness” or “righteousness”, nor does it brand warfare a crime (as does *Mozi* 17). Instead, it focuses on two very concrete aspects of warfare: gain and loss. The central message of the chapter is clear: in war, the anticipated gain never outweighs the guaranteed loss. Because this chapter is mainly concerned with a careful calculation of gain and loss, I call this the economic argument. The word “economic” here refers to the careful, efficient, and prudent management of the resources of a state. One way to use these resources in a responsible manner and avoid unnecessary waste or expense, Mozi argues, is to stop wars.

Mozi’s economic argument comes in what I consider three subarguments. He claims that in war (1) loss outweighs gain, (2) losers outnumber winners, and (3) even winners eventually become losers. I now outline each of these subarguments to show how they combine to form Mozi’s economic argument.

Loss Outweighs Gain

In the first part of the chapter, Mozi suggests that the belligerent rulers of his day are fixated on expected gain and conveniently overlook the

¹² Lowe, *Mo Tzu’s Religious Blueprint for a Chinese Utopia*, 109; Johnston, *The “Mozi,”* xlviii.

extensive costs of a military campaign. To counterbalance this one-sided fixation, he offers a detailed quantification of the costs involved:

今嘗計軍上。竹箭羽旄幄幕甲盾撥劫，往而靡弊腑冷不反者，不可勝數；又與矛戟戈劍乘車，其列住碎折靡弊而不反者，不可勝數。與其牛馬肥而往，瘠而反，往死亡而不反者，不可勝數。與其涂道之脩遠，糧食輟絕而不繼，百姓死者，不可勝數也；與其居處之不安，食飲之不時，飢飽之不節。百姓之道疾病而死者，不可勝數。喪師多不可勝數，喪師盡不可勝計。則是鬼神之喪其主后，亦不可勝數。

Now let us calculate the costs of a military expedition.¹³ Arrows, flags, tents, armor, shields, sword hilts—countless quantities are taken on a campaign, where they wear, tear, rust, and rot, never to return again. Spears, lances, swords, poniards, chariots, carts—countless quantities are taken on a campaign, where they break, burst, rust, and rot, never to return again. Oxen and horses—countless quantities start out fat and come back lean, or perish and do not return at all. Countless people will die because of the long journey or the shortage of food supply. Countless people will fall ill and die on the way because the encampments are unsafe, they do not eat and drink at proper times, and appetite and satiation are poorly attuned to one another. Countless troops will be lost in large numbers or perish entirely. As a result, also countless spirits will lose their worshipers. (18: 31/12–17)

The wide range of the expenditure is impressive, and the listed costs display an increasing value: materials > animals > humans > spirits. The diverse materials required for a military campaign (weapons, vehicles, tents) are extensive, but with enough financial resources, these goods can be replaced. Animals are more costly, for they take time to breed and are expensive to replace. Human lives, in Mozi's eyes, are precious, and even more so are their spirits. In the early Chinese worldview, the spirit of a soldier who dies on the battlefield, far from home, cannot be worshiped and turns into a hungry ghost, haunting the family and disrupting the cosmic and social order. If possible, this should be prevented at all costs.

Mozi is obviously concerned with the effects of warfare on the population, a concern to which “those who put a pleasing façade upon military aggression” must be oblivious, for they attack other states irrespective of the number of casualties. What, then, do they expect to gain? Mozi mentions two probable motives for warfare: fame and territory. He fumes at the first motive, because “when we calculate what they gain for themselves, it has no use whatsoever” 計其所自勝，無所可用也 (18: 31/20).

¹³ For “military expedition,” I follow Sun Yirang in reading 軍出 instead of 軍上.

Given that fame does not bring the state any tangible gain, Mozi does not waste another word on it. As for the second motive, he notes that the net proceeds of an attack are always negative, since conquering even a single walled fortification costs at least thousands of lives:

今攻三里之城，七里之郭。攻此不用銳，且無殺而徒得此然也。殺人多必數於萬，寡必數於千，然後三里之城，七里之郭，且可得也。

Suppose you laid siege to a city with inner walls measuring three miles and outer walls measuring seven miles.¹⁴ If you were able to take this city by attacking without the use of weapons and without shedding blood, it would be okay. In reality, taking a city with inner walls measuring three miles and outer walls measuring seven miles is possible only if the number of casualties at best runs into the thousands, and in the worst case tens of thousands die. (18: 31/21–22)

The idea that sieges are pointless finds support in an unexpected source. The *Art of War* (*Bingfa* 兵法), the famous military-strategic text ascribed to Sunzi 孫子, states that “the worst policy of all is to besiege walled cities” 其下攻城.¹⁵ There is, however, one notable difference between the military strategist and the political thinker. Whereas Sunzi criticizes sieges as a military-strategic mistake, Mozi sees them as an economic error. He argues that sacrificing people to gain territory is inherently illogical, for territory is what rulers had in abundance, while people were in short supply:

今盡王民之死，嚴下上之患，以爭虛城，則是棄所不足，而重所有餘也。為政若此，非國之務者也。

If you send your subordinates to certain death and aggravate disaster among superiors and inferiors, with the sole purpose of capturing a town in ruins, you waste what you so desperately need so that you may increase what you already have in abundance. With policies such as these, you render a disservice to the state. (18: 31/24–25)

In sum, these passages serve as a powerful reminder that any potential benefits from a military campaign will not be great enough to offset the various costs involved. This reminder is meant to dissuade warmongers, whose picture of war is often too rosy, from going into battle. While Mozi’s

¹⁴ These measurements may seem overly precise, but a similar city is described in *Mencius* 4.1. See Lau, *Mencius*, 85. This may have been a standard way of referring to a city of a certain size.

¹⁵ Giles, *Sun Tzu on the Art of War*, 18.

cost-benefit analysis may seem solid, “those who put a pleasing façade upon military aggression” do not throw in the towel just yet.

Losers Outnumber Winners

In the next part of the chapter, Mozi’s opponents mention four states (Chu 楚, Yue 越, Qi 齊, Jin 晉) that started out small but increased both their territory and their population through military campaigns. With these examples, they challenge Mozi’s claim that an expansion of territory necessarily entails a reduction in population. In his own typical way, Mozi identifies their claim as a fallacy of converse accident, an unfair generalization (“warfare is effective”) based on a small number of examples:

雖四五國則得利焉，猶謂之非行道也。譬若醫之藥人之有病者然。今有醫於此，和合其祝藥之于天下之有病者而藥之。萬人食此，若醫四五人得利焉，猶謂之非行藥也。故孝子不以食其親，忠臣不以食其君。古者封國於天下。尚者以耳之所聞。近者以目之所見。以攻戰亡者不可勝數。

Even if four or five states drew benefit from it, we would still call this an ineffective method. Compare it with a doctor who treats people with an illness. Suppose this doctor prescribes a uniform drug to all the sick in the world. If ten thousand took it and only four or five drew benefit from it, we would still call this an ineffective medicine. A filial son would not administer it to his parents, nor would a loyal subject administer it to his ruler. Now, in ancient times the empire was divided into many small states. Some existed long ago and are known only through stories. Some existed until recently and perished in front of our eyes. Either way, countless states have vanished due to military aggression. (18: 32/4–7)

For each triumphant state, Mozi argues, numerous weaker ones perished. With a ratio of four or five to ten thousand, the chances of winning are statistically minimal. Rulers who hold up the example of the historical successes of Chu, Yue, Qi, and Jin while ignoring the numerous vanquished states adopt a highly one-sided reading of history. The successes of these few states are no guarantee for other states.

There are two problems with Mozi’s argumentation. First, the chance of a triumphant attack may be minimal, but it is not nil. Although, statistically speaking, rulers had better take note of the thousands of perished states rather than focus on the handful of successful ones, the incentive still exists to strive for the power and glory of the triumphant few. Second, and more important, the argument would have worked if the thousands of states had perished as aggressors. In actual fact, some of the smaller and weaker states were annexed by larger and stronger ones. Hence, this argu-

ment could even be taken as an encouragement for states to grow large and strong, so as to prevent annexation by other states. Not surprisingly, Mozi's opponents picked up on this flaw in his argumentation.

Even Winners Eventually Become Losers

In the final part of the chapter, Mozi's opponents claim they can avoid the sad fate of the vanquished states by making effective use of their population, as allegedly did the few victorious states. Even this justification of warfare cannot convince Mozi, because employing the people well is not the same as treating them well, and good treatment of the masses is paradoxically made impossible by successful warfare:

子雖能收用子之衆，子豈若古者吳闔閭哉？古者吳闔閭教士七年。奉甲執兵，奔三百里而舍焉。次注林，出於冥隘之徑，戰於柏舉，中楚國而朝宋與魯。及至夫差之身，北而攻齊，舍於汶上，戰於艾陵，大敗齊人而葆之大山。東而攻越。濟三江五湖，而葆之會稽。九夷之國莫不賓服。於是退不能賞孤，施舍群萌。自恃其力，伐其功，譽其智，怠於教，遂築姑蘇之臺，七年不成。及若此，則吳有離罷之心。越王句踐視吳上下不相得，收其衆以復其讎。入北郭，徙大舟，圍王宮。而吳國以亡。

No matter how capable you are in employing the masses, are you as capable as King Helü from the ancient state of Wu? King Helü drilled his troops for seven years. Wearing armor and carrying weapons, they could march a hundred miles a day before encamping for the night. He pitched a camp at Zhulin, emerged from the narrow pass at Ming'ai, and fought a battle at Boju. He subdued Chu and forced the states of Song and Lu to surrender. Then his son, King Fuchai, succeeded to the throne and attacked the state of Qi in the north. He pitched a camp on the Wen River, fought a battle at Ailing, defeated Qi, and forced its soldiers to retreat to Mount Tai. In the east he attacked the state of Yue. He led the army to cross the Three Rivers and the Five Lakes and forced the soldiers of Yue to retreat to Kuaiji. All the barbarian states were subdued. Yet when the war was over, he could not find it in his heart to console the families of those who died in battle or to distribute war booty among the people. He relied upon his might, exaggerated his achievements, and praised his intelligence, but he neglected drilling his troops and had the Gusu Palace built, which was not completed even in seven years. By then, the people of Wu were disheartened and divided. Seeing the friction between superior and subordinates in Wu, King Goujian from the neighboring state of Yue mobilized his army to take revenge. They entered the city wall from the north, removed Fuchai's royal boats, and encircled his palace. Wu thereupon perished. (18: 32/17–23)

This passage describes the transition from war to postwar peace, and the psychology of the victor in this process. According to Mozi, no one is able

to hold one's own when faced with the seductions of success. Rulers may start out with the best intentions, but constant victories inevitably make them fall victim to arrogance and greed, because power corrupts and more power corrupts even more. For instance, the victorious ruler would not want to manage his enlarged realm from a humble abode but would desire an impressive palace that matches his newly acquired status. This only widens the distance between ruler and masses, if only because the latter are forced to slave at constructing the new palace.

In sum, according to Mozi's economic argument, the negative payoff of military aggression will necessarily be larger than the positive payoff. The costs of a military offensive are high and the gains few, the chances of losing are many and the chances of winning few, and even the most victorious states eventually collapse. He therefore maintains that policy makers who against all odds decide to go to war render a disservice to the state. As it turns out, Mozi and his opponents in this chapter argue from fundamentally different views on governance. His opponents believe that people serve the ruler, while Mozi holds the opposite stance. Where his opponents propose making effective use of the population for their own benefit, Mozi wants them to distribute war booty among the people as a means to win their hearts and minds and thereby strengthen the state. But what ruler who attacks other states out of greed would be inclined to do so?

The Religious Argument

The third of the three "Fei gong" chapters, *Mozi* 19, is a lengthy essay in which Mozi again argues with opponents. These opponents are probably comparable to the ones in the preceding chapter, but in chapter 19 they are more verbosely referred to as "rulers who delight in military aggression and put a pleasing façade upon their bellicose rhetoric so as to criticize our Master Mozi" 好攻伐之君，又飾其說以非子墨子 (19: 34/16). This explicit description suggests that the antiwar rhetoric by Mozi and his followers had gained a firm foothold and attracted the attention of the ruling classes. As a result, the tone of the debate between Mozi and opponents is fierce. The chapter opens with Mozi's suggestion that his opponents are utterly stupid:

今天下之所譽善者，其說將何哉？爲其上中天之利，而中中鬼之利，而下中人之利，故譽之與？意亡非爲其上中天之利，而中中鬼之利，而下中人之利，故譽之與？雖使下之愚人，必曰將爲其上中天之利，而中中鬼之利，而下中人之利，故譽之。

When the people in the world praise something as good, what is their reason? Do they praise it because it benefits Heaven on high, the spirits in the middle realm, and the people below? Or do they praise it because it does not benefit Heaven on high, the spirits in the middle realm, and the people below? Even the lowest fool still understands that they praise it because it benefits Heaven on high, the spirits in the middle realm, and the people below. (19: 33/12–15)

Those who fail to understand that military aggression harms the interests of Heaven, spirits, and people, Mozi insinuates, surpass even the lowest fool in stupidity. This is the first time in the “Fei gong” triplet that the Heaven–spirits–people trinity is mentioned.¹⁶ How does this trinity work? Taylor explains that in Mozi’s view “Heaven is an active force; it is capable of intervening in the world for the promulgation of its ways. Such intervention takes the form of rewards and punishments. Those who abide by the ways of Heaven are rewarded, and, in turn, those who reject Heaven suffer punishment.”¹⁷ In carrying out its retributive powers, Heaven is assisted by spirits, who serve as intermediaries between Heaven on high and the people on earth. We will see examples of how this works in the course of this section. For now, suffice it to say that given the crucial role of Heaven and the spirits in this chapter’s line of argumentation, I refer to it as the religious argument.

Having pointed out the stupidity of his opponents, Mozi continues by saying that the ancient sage-kings abided by the ways of Heaven. In his version of the past, the sages ruled humanely and did not engage in unprovoked military aggression:

是故古之知者之爲天下度也，必順慮其義，而後爲之行。是以動則不疑，速通成得其所欲，而順天鬼百姓之利。則知者之道也！是故古之仁人有天下者，必反大國之說。一天下之和，總四海之內。焉率天下之百姓，以農臣事上帝山川鬼神。利人多，功故又大。是以天賞之，鬼富之，人譽之。使貴爲天子，富有天下。名參乎天地，至今不廢。此則知者之道也，先王之所以有天下者也。

Therefore, the wise men in ancient times, when outlining a policy for the world, carefully contemplated whether it was righteous, and only then would they implement it. This way, they could act with determination, meet the needs of people far away and nearby, and bring benefit to Heaven, the spirits, and the people. Such is the way of the wise! Hence, the humane men who long ago possessed the world resolutely rejected any rhetoric of expanding the realm. Instead, they united the world in harmony, and they brought together

¹⁶ The trinity does occur in other Core Chapters, such as *Mozi* 10, 26, 27, and 28.

¹⁷ Taylor, “Religion and Utilitarianism,” 340.

all within the four seas. They led the people in serving and honoring the Lord on high and the spirits and ghosts of mountains and rivers. The more benefit they brought to the people, the greater their achievements. Heaven therefore rewarded them, the spirits enriched them, and the people praised them. They were honored with the rank of Son of Heaven, and all the worldly wealth fell to them. They shared the same reputation as Heaven and Earth and are remembered to this day. Such is the way of the ancient wise and the reason why the early kings held possession of the whole world. (19: 33/17–21)

The degenerate rulers of Mozi's own time are in no way comparable to the sages:

今王公大人、天下之諸侯則不然！將必皆差論其爪牙之士，比列其舟車之卒伍，於此爲堅甲利兵，以往攻伐無罪之國。入其國家邊境，芟刈其禾稼，斬其樹木，墮其城郭，以湮其溝池，攘殺其牲牲，燔潰其祖廟，勁殺其萬民，覆其老弱，遷其重器。卒進而柱乎門，曰：「死命爲上。多殺次之。身傷者爲下。又況失列北橈乎哉，罪死無赦！」以譚其衆。

How different are the kings, nobles, and dignitaries, all the feudal lords of today! They dispatch their best soldiers, arrange their boats and chariot forces, and equip them with strong armor and sharp weapons to attack innocent states. They cross the borders of those states, cutting down grain fields, felling trees and woods, tearing down city walls, filling up ditches and ponds, slaughtering cattle, setting ablaze the ancestral temples, massacring the people, exterminating the aged and the weak, and carrying off treasures and valuables. They force their soldiers to move forward and fight by saying: "Bravest are those who are killed in action. Next are those who kill many enemy combatants. Lowest are those who are wounded in battle. And whoever leaves the ranks and flees will be executed without mercy!" So their soldiers are kept in fear. (19: 33/23–27)

Mozi makes it perfectly clear that whoever indulges in attack and annexation will never be revered as a sage-king. But his opponents deliver a clever rejoinder. They acknowledge the existence of ancient sages and even name three examples: Yu 禹, founder of the Xia dynasty; Tang 湯, founder of the Shang dynasty; and King Wu 武王, founder of the Zhou dynasty. They then cleverly observe that these distinguished kings, held in esteem by Mozi too, founded their dynasties by attacking and ousting the last rulers of the preceding dynasties. So why are these three heads of state, in spite of their military offensives, still revered as sage-kings? In what appears to be an irritated tone, Mozi replies:

子未察吾言之類，未明其故者也。彼非所謂攻，所謂誅也。

You have not examined the nuances of my theories nor grasped the underlying reasoning. What these three kings did is not called "to attack" but "to punish." (19: 34/18)

Mozi apparently distinguishes between “to attack” (*gong* 攻) and “to punish” (*zhu* 誅). The former stands for assaults on innocent states, which Heaven condemns; the latter, for punitive action against guilty states, which Heaven conditionally supports, as we shall see.

Although Mozi criticizes his opponents for failing to understand the distinction between “offensive warfare” and “punitive warfare,” in all fairness he has not been clear about it. The distinction may have been explained in his oral teachings, but the written records of these teachings bear no witness to the fact. In the received *Mozi*, the usage of both terms is unclear. The term “to attack” (*gong* 攻) is used in various ways, but its precise meaning is not always clear. For instance, as I mentioned earlier, *Mozi* 17 condemns the practice of states attacking other states, but it does not explicitly distinguish between different possible motives for an attack, leaving it up to the reader to figure out that unprovoked assaults motivated by greed are meant here. The term “to punish” (*zhu* 誅) is not used in any of the three “Fei gong” chapters until Mozi introduces it here. For instance, when Mozi notes that authorities *punish* fruit thieves (*Mozi* 17), he uses the word *fa* 罰, not *zhu* 誅. In fact, the latter word does not occur very often in the *Mozi*, and when it does, it often simply means “to punish” without any reference to warfare.¹⁸ Notably, although Mozi blames his opponents for not grasping the difference between “offensive warfare” and “punitive warfare,” he himself does not systematically observe the distinction. For instance, *Mozi* 49 encourages the practice of “attacking an unrighteous state” 攻不義之國 (49: 113/27). Since this attack appears to serve as a punishment for that state’s unrighteous behavior, by Mozi’s own terminology the term “to punish” would have been preferred here. In another example, *Mozi* 31 states that the exemplary ruler King Wu “attacked the Shang dynasty to punish the tyrannical ruler Zhou” 攻殷誅紂 (31: 52/23). Here the terms “to attack” and “to punish” are compatible, not contrastive. Hence, Mozi’s criticism of his opponents may not be entirely fair if he does not use the two terms consistently in his own teachings.¹⁹

¹⁸ The term “to punish” occurs several times in compounds such as “punishments and penalties” (*zhu fa* 誅罰) or in phrases such as “punishments by ghosts and spirits” (*gui shen zhi zhu* 鬼神之誅). In fact, the only time when it has a clear military connotation is in the phrase “outward punishing” (*chu zhu* 出誅, i.e. punishing other states), which is contrasted to “inward defending” (*nei shou* 內守, i.e. defending the homeland) in *Mozi* 9 and 12.

¹⁹ It may be the case, as Hui-chieh Loy (personal communication) suggests, that passages in which the two terms are compatible date from a period when the Mohists had not yet settled on “to attack” and “to punish” as technical terms with clearly demarcated

The distinction that Mozi draws between “offensive warfare” and “punitive warfare” derives from a worldview that he shares with his contemporaries, in which dynasties rule by virtue of the Mandate of Heaven (*tian ming* 天命). Once a dynasty fails to secure the well-being of the population and hence loses the right to govern, it has become “guilty” and may be replaced by a new, humane administration. According to this widespread belief, the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties were founded in this way, after the alleged moral bankruptcy of the preceding dynasties. What are the signs of moral bankruptcy? Mozi paints a clear picture. Take his description of the dawn of the Shang dynasty, when the exemplary King Tang dethrones the tyrant Jie:

逮至乎夏王桀，天有誥命。日月不時，寒暑雜至，五穀焦死，鬼呼於國，鶴鳴十夕餘。天乃命湯於鑿宮，用受夏之大命...湯焉敢奉率其衆，是以鄉有夏之境，帝乃使陰暴毀有夏之城。少少有神來告曰：「夏德大亂，往攻之，予必使汝大堪之，予既受命於天。」天命融隆火，于夏之城間西北之隅，湯奉桀衆以克有夏，屬諸侯於薄，薦章天命，通于四方，而天下諸侯莫敢不賓服。則此湯之所以誅桀也。

In the case of King Jie of the Xia dynasty, Heaven sent down its direct command. Sun and moon failed to appear at the proper time, winter and summer came in confusion, all grains seared and died, ghosts wailed throughout the land, and cranes shrieked for more than ten nights. Heaven then commissioned Tang in the Biao palace to receive the Grand Mandate that had been given to the Xia. . . . Only then did Tang dare to lead his troops to enter the borders of the Xia realm, while a deity destroyed the fortifications of the Xia with immeasurable force. Soon afterward, a spirit appeared and reported to Tang: “The Xia are in grave moral decay. Go and attack them. I will make sure that you win, for I have my orders from Heaven!” Heaven then ordered Zhurong to send down fire on the northwestern corner of the capital city of the Xia, so that Tang, who had received the defecting multitudes of the tyrant Jie, could defeat the Xia. Tang then summoned all the nobles to Bo and made clear to them the Mandate of Heaven, sending word of it to all quarters of the world, and none of the feudal lords in the world failed to do obeisance to him. This is how the sage-king Tang punished the tyrant Jie. (19: 34/23–35/1)²⁰

meanings. In that case, the contrastive use of “to attack” versus “to punish” in this chapter may well be prescriptive (i.e., enjoining people to use the terms in this new way) rather than straightforwardly following the conventional meaning.

²⁰ The Chinese text of this passage is corrupt. It includes, for instance, a duplication of some phrases. My translation follows most of Sun Yirang’s suggestions.

In Mozi's account of how the sage-kings rose to power, Heaven steers the course of events. It assists soon-to-be kings in ousting tyrants who besmirched its Mandate. In the Mohist worldview, rulers must follow Heaven's orders, for Heaven always commands what is beneficial to the world.²¹ The people in the world are the primary concern for Heaven, which encompasses all people irrespective of their origin and cares for them without distinction or discrimination.²² This idea is made explicit in the third of the "Fei gong" chapters, *Mozi* 19, which uses terms such as "Heaven's men" (*tian zhi ren* 天之人) and "Heaven's subjects" (*tian min* 天民). This terminology, which places the ownership of people with Heaven and not with individual rulers, enables Mozi to highlight the paradoxical nature of warfare:

夫取天之人，以攻天之邑，此刺殺天民，剝振神之位，傾覆社稷，攘殺其犧牲，則此上不中天之利矣！

Now, if you deploy Heaven's men to attack Heaven's towns, thereby massacring Heaven's subjects, driving out the spirits of their ancestors, overthrowing their altars of the soil and grain, and slaughtering their sacrificial animals, you bring no benefit to Heaven on high! (19: 33/28–29)

If all the people in the world belong to Heaven, as Mozi claims, then war implies that one group of Heaven's subjects (the inhabitants of one state) attacks another group of Heaven's subjects (the inhabitants of another state). Whichever state wins, Heaven always loses due to the casualties on both sides. Therefore, in Mozi's view, Heaven would always reject "offensive warfare" and approve of "punitive warfare" only in exceptional cases, when all other options would cause even more suffering (e.g., when a tyrant causes starvation and death among the people).

Mozi's religious argument introduces Heaven as an objective standard, a universal guideline for moral conduct. High above the world, literally and figuratively, Heaven is in a position to decide whether or not an attack is morally justified, or even mandatory. In a time when numerous states competed with one another and each state claimed to be in the right, an objective standard was no luxury. The absence of an objective standard

²¹ The issue of whether or not Mozi subscribes to a divine-command theory has led to heated debate among a number of scholars (e.g., Ahern, Vorenkamp, Soles, Duda). See Duda, "Reconsidering Mo Tzu on the Foundations of Morality."

²² This aspect of Heaven is mentioned in several places in the received *Mozi*, most notably in the "Intention of Heaven" triplet, where we read that "since it accepts food from all people without discrimination, it must care for all people without discrimination" 苟兼而食焉，必兼而愛之 (28: 48/6–7).

explains the application of double standards, of which Mozi accuses “the gentlemen of the world” in *Mozi* 17. To put it differently, Heaven is the impartial arbiter that Mozi was looking for in that chapter.²³ In a conflict between two states, Heaven decides which of the antagonists is in the right and punishes the one who has done wrong. When a ruler reigns as a tyrant, Heaven wreaks havoc in his state as a sign that he has lost the Mandate. Simultaneously, Heaven indicates to a humane leader that he is chosen to overthrow the tyrant, for the Mandate has been transferred to him. Rulers who wish to attack and annex other states had better ascertain whether they have received Heaven’s support. If no unequivocal signs of approval have occurred, their attack lacks legitimacy. They may initially achieve successes, but eventually they will fail, as the example of Fuchai in the preceding chapter shows.

The religious argument may be Mozi’s ultimate line of argumentation against military aggression, for it is based, not just on the public’s sense of justice (*Mozi* 17) or on a solid cost-benefit analysis (*Mozi* 18), but on the will of the almighty Heaven. Whoever disagrees with Mozi and continues to proceed with unprovoked military offensives acts in opposition to Heaven and will receive due punishment. The argument nonetheless leaves many questions unanswered, especially with regard to Heaven’s intervention in the human world: How many signs should Heaven send down to signal the loss of the Mandate? What would these signs look like? How can rulers be prevented from inventing signs or claiming ordinary natural phenomena as special signs from Heaven? This issue appears to be a major loophole in Mozi’s argumentation. As Benjamin Wong and Hui-chieh Loy point out, any ambitious ruler can claim that “spirits have visited him” and furthermore “contrive things so as to give the appearance that Heaven is on his side, and thus claim an even closer alignment between his actions and those of the sage-kings.”²⁴ Since so much depends on subjective interpretation, does the religious argument offer a way to determine objectively whether or not the actions of a ruler are just, and whether or not his military offensive is justified?

It appears that, contrary to what Mozi suggests, there is no objective standard when Heaven’s signs have to be subjectively interpreted by man.²⁵ Mozi may have been aware of this, judging by the extraordinary

²³ This is further proof that *Mozi* 17 predates *Mozi* 19 (see above), as the reverse order would make little sense.

²⁴ B. Wong and Loy, “War and Ghosts in Mozi’s Political Philosophy,” 347.

²⁵ See also Nicolas Standaert’s essay in this volume.

historical examples he gives in which it is absolutely clear that warfare was necessary. His descriptions of the founding of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties are unique. No other text is known to contain descriptions of such dramatic intensity. While the stories may have been taken at face value in those days, it appears that Mozi embroidered them with shocking elements (crying ghosts, shrieking birds, natural disasters, etc.) to make it virtually impossible for contemporary rulers to claim a similar situation. Hence, his religious argument is perhaps best seen as an “impossible test” that puts the bar for permissible wars unfeasibly high.²⁶ If the contemporary situation in a state is not as deplorable as in Mozi’s stories, Heaven obviously has not issued clearly identifiable signs that would justify the invasion and annexation of that state. Whoever does launch an attack without these signs (i.e., without the Mandate of Heaven) acts in opposition to Heaven and is doomed to fail. The religious argument, then, ultimately depends on a belief in Heaven and spirits and on a belief in Mozi’s version of history. But what can Mozi do if bellicose rulers remain undaunted by his warnings?

The Dialogues

The three Core Chapters under discussion may be seen as the theoretical foundation of Mozi’s military views. Elsewhere in the received *Mozi*, we are shown how the different arguments were used in practice—if the recorded anecdotes are historically accurate. These anecdotes occur in the so-called Dialogues (*Mozi* 46–49/50), which are filled with short conversations between Mozi and various followers and opponents. Several conversations appear to draw from or build on the arguments proposed in the “Fei gong” triplet. Most of these conversations are between Mozi and Lord Wen of Luyang 魯陽文君.

One passage, *Mozi* 49: 112/20–22, is essentially a summary of the moral argument. In words similar to those in *Mozi* 17, Mozi tells Lord Wen that “the gentlemen of our times” 世俗之君子 understand small wrongdoings (crime) but fail to understand mistakes of greater magnitude (war). Another passage, *Mozi* 46: 103/5–9, is reminiscent of the economic argument: here Mozi compares a ruler who has all the fertile lands he needs but still desires some remote areas of a neighboring state to a man who

²⁶ I thank Michael Nylan (personal communication) for suggesting the term “impossible test.”

cannot finish all the delicacies his chef prepares but still craves the cake of his neighbor. This comparison convinces Lord Wen into admitting that both are cases of “kleptomania” (*qie ji* 竊疾). Another passage, in chapter 46, likewise invokes the economic argument, when Mozi (perhaps somewhat facetiously) compares the extravagant waste of resources in warfare to a little boy playing horse:

子墨子謂魯陽文君曰：「大國之攻小國，譬猶童子之為馬也。童子之為馬，足用而勞。今大國之攻小國也，攻者農夫不得耕，婦人不得織，以守為事。攻人者，亦農夫不得耕，婦人不得織，以攻為事。故大國之攻小國也，譬猶童子之為馬也。」

Our Master Mozi told Lord Wen of Luyang: “When a large state attacks a small state, this can be compared to a little boy playing horse. When a little boy plays horse, he exhausts himself by constantly running on his own legs. Now, when a large state attacks a smaller one, in the small state under attack, farmers do not get a chance to plow and their wives do not get a chance to weave, because they are too occupied defending the state. Moreover, in the state that initiated the attack, farmers also do not get a chance to plow and their wives also do not get a chance to weave, because they are too occupied attacking the other state. That is how large states attacking smaller states can be compared to a small boy playing horse.” (46: 101/26–28)

The impact of war on the lives of the common people is also part of the economic argument in *Mozi* 18, where Mozi emphasizes that no season is good for warfare (winter is too cold to fight, summer too hot; in spring, the people are kept from sowing, in autumn from harvesting). This chapter, *Mozi* 46, expands the economic argument by noting that battles keep the people *on both sides* of the conflict needlessly occupied.

And in yet another passage, in chapter 49, the religious argument comes up. As in *Mozi* 19, this passage discusses unjust “attacks” (*gong* 攻) and their proper “punishment” (*zhu* 誅). And as earlier, Mozi’s opponent notices a loophole in his argumentation:

魯陽文君將攻鄭。子墨子聞而止之，謂魯陽文君曰：「今使魯四境之內，大都攻其小都，大家伐其小家，殺其人民，取其牛馬狗豕布帛米粟貨財。則何若？」魯陽文君曰：「魯四境之內，皆寡人之臣也，今大都攻其小都。大家伐其小家，奪之貨財，則寡人必將厚罰之。」子墨子曰：「夫天之兼有天下也，亦猶君之有四境之內也。今舉兵將以攻鄭，天誅宥不至乎？」魯陽文君曰：「先生何止我攻鄭也？我攻鄭，順於天之志。鄭人，三世殺其父，天加誅焉。使三年不全，我將助天誅也。」子墨子曰：「鄭人三世殺其父，而天加誅焉。使三年不全，天誅足矣。今又舉兵，將以攻鄭，曰「吾攻鄭也，順於天之志」。譬有人於此，其子強梁不材，故其父笞之，其鄰家之父，舉木而擊之，曰「吾擊之也，順於其父之志」，則豈不悖哉？」

Lord Wen of Luyang was about to attack Zheng. Upon hearing this, our Master Mozi stopped him, saying: "Suppose that within the four borders of your realm, the large cities attacked the smaller ones, the large families struck at the smaller ones, killing their people, stealing their livestock, their clothes, their food, and other valuables. What would you do?" Lord Wen of Luyang replied: "Within the four borders of my realm, all people are my subjects. If the large cities attacked the smaller ones, the large families struck at the smaller ones, to seize their valuables, then I would severely punish them." Our Master Mozi replied: "You see, Heaven possesses the whole world in the same way that you possess everything within the four borders of your realm. If you were to raise troops and attack Zheng, wouldn't Heaven's punishment be imminent?" Lord Wen of Luyang asked: "How can you prevent me from attacking Zheng when, by attacking Zheng, I am merely complying with the will of Heaven? For three generations, the people of Zheng have killed their father [i.e., their ruler], and Heaven extended punishment on that state. If after three years this punishment is not yet completed, I will assist in executing Heaven's punishment." Our Master Mozi replied: "Indeed, for three generations, the people of Zheng have killed their father, and Heaven extended punishment on that state. But even if after three years this punishment is not yet completed, Heaven's punishment is sufficient. If you raise troops to attack Zheng with the excuse that 'in attacking Zheng, I am merely complying with the will of Heaven,' then this can be compared to a man whose son is violent and dim-witted, so the man flogs him with a bamboo stick, whereupon their neighbor also picks up a stick to beat him, with the excuse that 'in beating him, I merely comply with the intention of his father.' Wouldn't this be perverse?" (49: 112/6–14)

This dialogue confirms the stubbornness of Mozi's opponents, who will try any flaw in his argumentation to proceed with their desired military offensive.

Whether fact or fiction, the dialogues between Mozi and Lord Wen appear to serve as test cases for the various "against military aggression" arguments. In these conversations, Mozi confirms the validity of his arguments and strengthens them by closing potential loopholes. The conversations further reinforce the arguments by adding a hint of sarcasm, humorous yet very destructive elements intended to belittle those who wage unnecessary wars. For instance, he has Lord Wen confirm that belligerent rulers are nothing but kleptomaniacs, and he claims that rulers who engage in warfare are fooling around like little boys. This rhetorical strategy apparently worked, for the text has Lord Wen exclaim: "Indeed, when I look at the matter in the light of what you have just told me, then what the world finds acceptable [i.e., attacking other states] is certainly not so!" 然，吾以子之言觀之，則天下之所謂可者，未必然也 (49: 112/18).

In the *Mozi*, Mozi naturally wins all debates. His opponents, such as Lord Wen, heed his advice and wake up from their expansionist dreams. Meanwhile, history shows that, in spite of their noble efforts, Mozi and his followers were not able to end wars with their words. For the Warring States period came to an end in 221 BCE . . . after the state of Qin had conquered all competitors in a series of military campaigns.

Conclusion

The preceding sections studied three distinct arguments against military aggression: moral, economic, religious. They show that Mozi's antiwar stance cannot be reduced to one coherent argument or, worse, to the simplistic label "pacifist." The arguments are complex, and so is the textual relationship between the three chapters that contain them. In the past decades, efforts to solve the complex puzzle of the Core Chapters' threefold structure intensified. Scholars proposed various criteria, mainly textual, to expose different layers of text and provide rough dates for each layer. While there is consensus that *Mozi* 17, 18, and 19 were created in that sequence, more precision is lacking. It is telling that a recent study of the Mohist Core Chapters concludes with the observation that the history of the Core Chapters "is much more complex than is generally thought."²⁷ Then again, the quest for textual-historical precision, however important, distracts from what I consider the most attractive aspect of the three "Fei gong" chapters: the fact that we have here, in one book, no fewer than three distinct lines of argumentation on one topic. Irrespective of when and where these chapters were created, and by whom, or how precisely they relate to one another, these chapters offer a fascinating insight into the dynamics within the school of Mozi. The chapters show how the Mohists passionately condemn military offensives and forward different arguments in response to different audiences or objections raised. Elites who frown upon crime but rejoice about war are shown the duplicity of their moral standards. Warmongers raising troops are confronted with the insurmountable costs of the operation or scared with Heaven's wrath.

²⁷ Desmet, "All Good Things Come in Threes," 250–251.