In modern China, the word “historian” seems to have different meanings. We call a scholar “historian” who uses several modern theories to discuss events that occurred in the past. However, when we also call people in the past, such as SIMA Qian 司馬遷 and ZHANG Xuecheng 章學誠, “historians,” we mean something different. Historians living in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China, such as MENG Wentong, established their own historical ideas on the basis of studies of Confucian classics. Today, we also call Meng a historian because his famous works on early nationality history and China’s borderland history and geography have a profound and lasting influence in China, and he spent his later years in the Institute of History in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. In fact, his two teachers when he was young were great masters in Confucian classics. One was LIAO Ping 廖平, who was an expert on the New Text (jing wen jingxue 今文經學), and the other was LIU Shipei 劉師培, who specialized in Old Text (gu wen jingxue 古文經學). Meng himself had two important works on Confucian classics in his early professional life, Research on Confucian Classics 經學抉原 (1933) and Five Essays on Confucianism 儒學五論 (1944). Consequently, we cannot really understand his opinions of history unless we understand his study of Confucianism.

Five Essays on Confucianism is his mature work. In this work, he described Confucianism as both “sage within” and “king without” (neisheng yu waiwang 內聖與外王), including Confucian philosophy, political systems, and social organization. In the 1940s, while there were still some traditional scholars approaching to Confucianism from a philological perspective, some political reformers tried to use Confucianism to reform the Chinese government, and some New Confucians interpreted Confucianism as a kind of philosophy of mind. Meng was different. He said: “In a good time, you can use Confucianism to serve the world; in a bad time, you can only use Confucianism to improve yourself. ‘Sage within, king without’ is the key of Confucianism” (149). Meng divided Five Essays on Confucianism into two parts. Part one consists of five articles on basic questions, and part two consists of four articles which reinforce and expand the view in the first part. This division obviously originated in ancient Chinese works which were divided into “inner
chapters” (nei pian 内篇) and “outer chapters” (wai pian 外篇). I will discuss the three most important essays below.

The first essay of this book, “The Development of Confucian Philosophy,” discusses the “Sage within” of Confucianism. From this title we find that Meng also adopted the phrase “Confucian Philosophy,” which was used by Hu Shi 胡适 in his works. But their understandings of this term were different. Hu recognized Confucianism as one part of ancient Chinese philosophy and he always used modern and scientific methods to study Confucianism. Therefore, Hu’s Confucianism was only the description and records of Confucian thoughts in ancient times. However, Meng discussed the most fundamental questions regarding Nature (xing 性), Life (ming 命), Principle (li 理), and Virtue (dixin 德性) in Confucianism. He discussed these questions by drawing on “The Five Classics” (wujing 五經). Through elaborating the various opinions of the school of Zisi 子思 and Mencius, Xunzi 荀子, Guanzi 管子, and scholars in the Han and Song Dynasties on these fundamental questions, he continued to think through these questions. Consequently, the purpose of Confucian philosophy for Meng was to educate people and tell them what kind of life is worth living. Meng believed that his Confucian philosophy would be useful to everyone in the world in the future, especially after two world wars.

The second essay, “The Development of Confucian Political System,” discusses the “king without” of Confucianism. Recently, talking about “king without” has become quite popular in China, and many people have the misunderstanding that Confucianism allies itself with the Chinese government. Actually it does not. So in this essay, following much of the early view of his teacher LIAO Ping 廖平, Meng considered the Confucian political system, which in his view was first constructed by the New Text School 今文經學, as the most ideal system in human history, reminding us of Plato’s Republic. Meng thought that the Confucian political system included jingtian 井田, biyong 辟雍, fengshan 封禪, and mingtang 明堂. From a modern perspective, the above four respectively mean economic system, education, the handover of political power, the relationship between central and local authorities, and parliament. These were what the New Text School designed for an ideal society. Meanwhile, Meng thought that the Confucian political system was established more or less by Confucian scholars in the Han Dynasty. That’s why he extolled them. Meng believed that “king without” needs the support of a political system rather than an empty theory, and we could learn from the practical experiences of Confucian political system in Han Dynasty.

Therefore, the interpretation of “sage within and king without” is Meng’s most important idea on Confucianism. Confucianism, or Confucian classics, is not a discipline in the modern sense like chemistry, but it is the core of all other Chinese knowledge. Confucianism helps people know what virtue is and what kind of state is just. Now, we can understand the ideas of the other four essays in this book besides the five essays on basic questions. In these four historical essays, Meng talked about “Business in Zhou Dynasty,” “Qin Dynasty Society,” “Economic Policy in Han Dynasty,” and “The Social Designs of Song and Ming Dynasties.” The fact that these historical essays are brought into the book on Confucianism shows Meng’s understanding of Confucianism.

The most interesting essay among these four is the one on the social designs of the Song and Ming Dynasties. For a long time, Confucianism in the Song and Ming Dynasties has been described as a sort of philosophy of mind. Especially in the 20th century, the rising of New Confucianism reinforced this opinion. It was favored by many people. Meng’s essay attempts to correct people’s inaccurate impression. He thought that scholars in the Song Dynasty seldom paid attention to the political regime, military affairs, and criminal laws, yet they never forgot their duty to make society better. In the Han and Tang Dynasties,