

An Introduction To Xunzi 荀子

Respected professor Honey, good morning, and good afternoon my dear classmates, today I would like to introduce you to an ancient Chinese scholar Xunzi.

Xunzi, personal name of Kuang 况, was one of the Chinese philosophers of Confucianism who lived during the late Warring States period. He is best known by his honorary title Xunzi translated to “Master Xun”, with zi being a common epitaph for important philosophers. Xunzi was born in the State of Zhao, he studied at the prestigious Jixia 稷下 Academy of the State of Qi 齐. After he traveled to Chu, where he mastered poetry, he returned to Qi and then served as libationer 祭酒 at the Academy three times, which amounted to the director of the academy. But then he had to flee the kingdom of Ch'i 齐 because King Min forced the academicians into exile. Therefore, he entered the state of Chu 楚 again and served Lord Ch'un Shen 春申 as magistrate in Lan-ling County, a region in what is today's southern Shandong province. He also visited the state of Ch'in after the legalistic reforms of Shang yang were already in place. However, Lord Chunshen was assassinated in 238 BCE by a court rival and Xunzi subsequently lost his position. He retired, remained in Lanling for the rest of his life and was buried there.

After Confucius and Mencius, Xunzi is often ranked as the third great Confucian philosopher of antiquity. In comparison with Confucius and

Mencius, Xunzi's thought had a more realistic bent, this may be related to the context in which he lived. The Warring States period is an era of immense disunity and warfare, most people were living in turmoil and suffering, chaos had been raging for over a hundred years by the time of Xunzi's birth in the late 4th-century BCE. Yet this time also saw considerable innovations in Chinese Philosophy, referred to as the Hundred Schools of Thought. At that time, the primary schools were Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism, Mohism, the School of Names, and the Yin–Yang School. Under given this background, Xunzi was a philosopher in the tradition of Confucianism, however, he critically accepted and creatively developed the ideas and theories of Confucian orthodoxy, in the meantime, incorporated the teachings of Legalism and some of the features of other schools. He emphasized the punitive role of the political and legal system, while at the same time emphasizing the importance of ritual and moral education. Professor Honey has pointed out in his book that, a very high laud was awarded Xunzi by modern researcher Yu Wanli, who praises him as a Confucian *magisterium*, able to determine doctrine *ex cathedra*, phrased in Chinese as a ‘Gatherer of great accomplishments’ 集大成者。

The greatest point of difference between Xunzi and Mencius probably rests on the discussion of human nature and ritual. The best known and most cited section of Xunzi's teaching is in chapter 23, that ‘Human

Nature is Evil'. This has led many commentators to place him opposite of Mencius, who believed human nature was intrinsically good. According to Schwartz, Xunzi 'takes up and carries further the cause of Kao-tzu in his dialogue with Mencius. He negates any inborn spontaneous tendency toward "humanity and righteousness" within the human heart.' Based on this understanding, he justifies support for education and moral training, and believed that education and ritual were the key to self-cultivation and thus the method to circumvent one's naturally evil nature.

In Xunzi's view, the purpose of ritual is to curb man's natural desires and train them, and to satisfy them, which means ritual is a product of balancing the growth of material things with the growth of desires. It seems that there is a conflict between man's natural desire for profits and the role of ritual, which always restricts human desire. In order to ensure the proper functioning of public order, the observance of rites inevitably had to resort to coercion. Thus, rites were transformed into law. This reveals the realistic and practical feature of Xunzi's thought. He can be described as a thinker who sought to maintain a balance between the realistic pursuit of profit and its necessity while adhering to Confucian moral ideals.

From the point of view of the development of Chinese classics, Xunzi is indispensable to Confucianism in the two Han dynasties, very important, and cannot be ignored. Many Confucians and scholars of the

Han dynasty were either disciples or second-generation disciples of Xunzi. It is impossible to talk about the transmission of scholarship without mentioning Xunzi, who has an important place in the history of Chinese classical scholarship.

That's all for my report today, thank you for your listening.