



Undergraduate assignment feedback form

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Student Name: Xinyu Wang (王鑫宇)	
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An Introduction to Xunzi 荀子 and his influence on Chinese Classical Scholarship

I. Introduction

Xunzi 荀子 was a famous philosopher, thinker, and literary scholar in ancient China, and a representative of the Confucian school. Xunzi developed Confucianism while absorbing Legalistic doctrine. He respected benevolent government and also claimed hegemony; he respected ritual and righteousness, but also emphasized the rule of law; he advocated not only following the law of the previous king 法先王, but also following the law of the latter king 法後王. Mencius focused on that human's nature is good, emphasizing the nurturing of nature; Xunzi advocated that human's nature is evil, which emphasized acquired learning. He also proposed man's victory over heaven, against fatalism. In addition to having different ideas and insights from most Pre-Qin 先秦 Confucians, he played an important role in the transmission and development of Chinese classical scholarship.

II. Xunzi's life and main thoughts

Xunzi, whose name is Kuang 況, his courtesy name is Qing 卿, according to the biography of “Mencius and Xunqing” in the *Records of the Historian* 史記, he was a native of the State of Zhao 趙 in the Warring States period. He once travelled to the Jixia 稷下 Academy of the State of Qi 齊 to study. In its prosperous period, the Jixia Academy hosted almost every school of thought among the hundred schools of thought at that time. Among these, the major ones were Taoism, Confucianism, Legalism, Yin and Yang and so on. There were around 1,000 wise men from all over the world gathered there, including famous scholars such as Mencius Chun Yukun 淳于髡 Zou Shi 驺奭 Xun Zi, etc. At that time, it was the academic center with the longest duration and the highest concentration of talents. Xunzi served the Jijiu 祭酒 (similar to modern chief executive officer) of Jixia 稷下 Academy three times. During his lifetime, Xunzi has visited the states of Qi 齊, Qin 秦, Zhao 趙, Chu 楚 and other countries, but neither Qin nor Zhao have appointed him to a position of power.

According to the *Records of the Historian* 史記, when Xunzi arrived in the state of Chu 楚, Huang Xie 黃歇, lord Chunshen 春申君, appointed Xunzi as the county magistrate of Lanling 蘭陵. After lord Chunshen's death, Xunzi was deposed and settled in Lanling. At that time, he hated the chaotic politics, so he wrote a book of tens of thousands of words on the behaviour and the rise and fall of Confucianism, Mohism and Taoism, and then died and was buried in Lanling. Xunzi is considered to be the last Confucian master after Confucius and Mencius in the Pre-Qin period, and in the *Records of the Historian* written by Sima Qian 司馬遷, Mencius and Xunzi are listed alongside each other in a biography, while the others are listed after them, showing that Sima Qian held Xunzi in high regard.

Xunzi's main work is *Xunzi* 荀子, of which there are 32 extant volumes covering the fields of morality, politics, ethics and so on. In his book, he expounds his unique thoughts on moral and ethical issues. The following are two examples.

The first thought is “distinction between mankind and heaven” 天人相分 the naturalistic view of heaven and mankind. Xunzi naturalizes, objectifies, and regularizes “heaven” 天 and “destiny of heaven” 天命, as he wrote in the chapter of his book “Discourse on Nature” 天論: “The constellations follow their revolutions; the sun and moon alternately shine; the four seasons present themselves in succession; the Yin and Yang enlarge and transform; and the wind and rain spread out everywhere. Each of the myriad things must be in a harmonious relation with Nature in order to grow, and each must obtain from Nature the proper nurture in order to become complete. We do not perceive the process but we perceive the result this indeed is why we call it “divine.” All realize that Nature has brought completion, but none realize its formlessness this indeed is why we call it “Nature.” Only the sage acts not seeking to know Nature.”¹ Xunzi believes that heaven is natural, without reason, will, good and evil, likes and dislikes. Heaven is the natural Heaven, not a personal god. The creation of the universe is not a divine creation, but the result of the operation of all things themselves. Nature and human beings each have their own laws and vocation. Heaven cannot interfere with the ways of man. Heaven to heaven, man to man, therefore, it is said that heaven and man are separated from each other. The chapter “Discourse on Ritual Principles” 禮論 of

¹ Translated into English by John Knoblock, *Library of Chinese Classics: Xunzi* (Hunan: Hunan People's Publishing House 湖南人民出版社, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press 外文出版社, 1999), p.536-537.

Xunzi stated that “Heaven is able to beget the myriad things, but it cannot differentiate them. Earth can support man, but it cannot govern him.”² In other words, luck or misfortune is determined by people, not by Nature. In his chapter “Discourse on Nature”, it is said that “Heaven has its seasons; Earth its resources; and Man his government.”³ This explains the different functions of heaven and human beings. In *Xunzi*'s view, it is better to make use of the laws of nature to serve man than to be superstitious about the authority of heaven, to pine for it, to sing its praises, and to wait for its blessings. *Xunzi* stressed the importance of “respecting those who are in one's self” 敬其在己者 rather than “admiring those who are in heaven” 慕其在天者. When faced with nature, he emphasized the subjective initiative of human beings, and advocated the ideas of “ruling the laws of heaven” 製天命.

The second is the claim that man is evil by nature. From the standpoint of the distinction between mankind and heaven, *Xunzi* rejected the moral basis of good human nature. In his opinion, human nature is the biological instinct of mankind. He exclaimed that “What characterizes a man from birth is called his ‘nature’”⁴ 生之所以然者, therefore, people would appear “when hungry he desires something to eat, that when cold he wants warm clothing, and that when weary he desires rest”⁵ 饑而欲飽, 寒而欲暖, 勞而欲休, all these are essential qualities inherent in one's nature, thus these natural human desires for a material life was in conflict with moral and ceremonial norms. According to his chapter “Man's Nature Is Evil”, he believed that “the nature of man is such that he is born with a love of profit” 生而有好利焉, “humans are born with feelings of envy and hatred” 生而有疾惡焉 and “Man is born possessing the desires of the ears and eyes(which are fond of sounds and colors)” 生而有耳目之欲, 有好色焉, if “each person follows his inborn nature and indulges his natural inclinations, aggressiveness and greed are certain to develop. This is accompanied by violation of social class distinctions and throws the natural order into anarchy, resulting in a

² Translated into English by John Knoblock, *Library of Chinese Classics: Xunzi* (Hunan: Hunan People's Publishing House 湖南人民出版社, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press 外文出版社, 1999), p.629.

³ Translated into English by John Knoblock, *Library of Chinese Classics: Xunzi* (Hunan: Hunan People's Publishing House 湖南人民出版社, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press 外文出版社, 1999), p.535.

⁴ Translated into English by John Knoblock, *Library of Chinese Classics: Xunzi* (Hunan: Hunan People's Publishing House 湖南人民出版社, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press 外文出版社, 1999), p.707.

⁵ Translated into English by John Knoblock, *Library of Chinese Classics: Xunzi* (Hunan: Hunan People's Publishing House 湖南人民出版社, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press 外文出版社, 1999), p.747.

cruel tyranny.”⁶從人之性，順人之情，必出於爭奪，合於犯紛亂理而歸於暴 Therefore, from this theory, human nature is evil, but not good. Xunzi valued human rationality and the ability to learn, believing that good deeds are acquired through learning and that all people have the ability to learn ritual and justice. An exemplary man 君子, should be guided by the teachings of his teacher, and the guidance of rituals. Through his perseverant efforts, he will eventually develop morality and virtue.

III. Xunzi's influence on Chinese Classical Scholarship

Chinese classicism is commonly understood to be the study of Confucius and the Confucian classics, and Confucianism has played a significant role in Chinese history. In fact, the concept of 'classical scholarship' was only created with the establishment of the Doctor of Five Classics by Han Wu, but the formation of it predates far more than this. During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, Confucius edited the Six Classics, they are the Poems, the Documents, the Book of Rites, the Classic of Music, the Book of Changes and the Spring and Autumn Annals. According to Liu Shiwei 劉師培's *Jingxue Jiaoke shu* 經學教科書, since the establishment of the doctorate in Lu, the Six Classics have been used as the official textbook.⁷ All these could be the origin of Chinese classical scholarship.

Wang Zhong 汪中, a scholar of Qing dynasty had stated in his book *Shu Xue* 述學 that: “Xun's learning was derived from that of Confucius, and was especially merited by the classics.”⁸ 荀氏之學，出於孔氏，而尤有功於諸經. In his writings, Xunzi quoted from all the Six Classics, most often from the Poems. In fact, in his chapters “Exhortation to Learning” 勸學 and “Teachings of the Ru” 儒效, he links *the Spring and Autumn Annals* with *the Poems*, *the Esteemed Documents*, *the Book of Rites*, *the Classic of Music*; meanwhile, in his “Great Compendium” 大略 chapter, he has already roughly laid out the scale of the Six Classics by juxtaposing *the Poems* and *the Book of Changes*. Liu Shiwei wrote in his book that: “Zi Xia

⁶ Translated into English by John Knoblock, Library of Chinese Classics: Xunzi (Hunan: Hunan People's Publishing House 湖南人民出版社, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press 外文出版社, 1999), p.741.

⁷ Liu Shiwei 劉師培, *Jingxue jiaoke shu* 經學教科書(Changchun:Jilin People's Press 吉林人民出版社, 2013), p.29.

⁸ Li Jinsong 李金松, *Shuxue Jiaojian* 述學校箋(Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press 中華書局, 2014) p.451.

and Xunzi were the gather of great results of the Six Classics. During Han dynasty, most Confucian scholars normally belonged to the schools of Zi Xia and Xunzi ”⁹是子夏、荀卿者集六經學術之大成者也。兩漢諸儒殆守子夏、荀卿之學派者與. Xunzi lived in the late Warring States period, a time when the nations were in strife and war was rampant. He travelled from country to country, engaging in political activities or lecturing. He was familiar with the Six Classics and constantly quoted them in his speeches. He was dedicated to the promotion and dissemination of Confucianism and made an indelible contribution to the transmission of Confucian classics. Confucianism highly depends on the Six Classics for its continuous development. As the last Confucian master of the Pre-Qin dynasty, Xunzi played an important role in carrying on the past heritage and open up the future for Chinese classics.

IV. Conclusion

It is undeniable that Xunzi has made a significant contribution to Chinese scripture, and he has played a crucial role in transmitting it as well. Contrary to the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, Xunzi's scholarly ideas haven't been respected and accepted by most subsequent generations of scholars and even been subject to controversy in some cases, which is probably a misunderstanding or an underestimation of him going on here. Xunzi followed in the ways of Confucius, placed great importance on morality and ethics, advocating benevolence, righteousness, propriety and truthfulness. He gathered the best of Pre-Qin ritual theory, emphasizing self-cultivation and education in ritual. He believed human nature is evil that people are born without morality and will hate and fight each other if they indulge their passions without restraint; that moral values are an acquired human construction, created by the sages to regulate people's behaviour and glorify human nature. His ideas and method of governance are still very practical and effective in today's society.

⁹ Liu Shipai 劉師培, *Jingxue jiaoke shu* 經學教科書(Changchun:Jilin People's Press 吉林人民出版社, 2013), p.24.

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