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# Using Xunzi and Mencius to Adapt and Reclaim Modernity: A Reconstruction of Confucianism in the Modern Context

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## Abstract

Reconstructing Confucianism for the modern age presents us with two main tasks. The first is to borrow from the tradition of Xunzi 荀子 in order to face the challenges of Westernization and modernization and, in turn, modernize ourselves. The second is to embrace the tradition of Mencius 孟子 with the purpose of defining our own cultural and personal values, guarding against some of the pitfalls of modernization. In many ways, the Xunzi branch is more beneficial for the continuing growth of Confucianism: it is analytical – even scientific – in its approach to political theory. But, of course, it is not a complete system. Xunzi correctly discovered the dark side of human nature, but Mencius correctly discovered its good side. These two systems of philosophy are each well equipped for complementing the other's shortcomings. This is why we advocate for a critical unification of Mencius' and Xunzi's philosophies, with the aim of helping Confucianism evolve into a philosophy that is relevant and prosperous in the twenty-first century.

## Keywords

modernization – philosophy of Mencius – philosophy of Xunzi – reconstructing Confucianism

Confucianism has always advanced and developed with the times. At times, it has adapted in response to the demands of the social reality. For example, Confucianism was created before the Qin dynasty [221–207 BCE] in response

to dramatic social changes in the Warring States period [475–221 BCE], whereas the neo-Confucianism in the Han dynasty [202 BCE–220] was a response to the unification of the Qin. At other times, Confucianism developed in response to foreign cultural influence. The neo-Confucianism in the Song [960–1279] and Ming [1368–1644] dynasties, for example, was a reconstruction of traditional Confucian thought in the face of challenges from the competing doctrine of Buddhism. Today, the development of Confucianism is confronted by social change at a scale never seen before in history and by a new type of foreign cultural influence, as Western culture makes inroads in China. The massive social changes seen today are due in part to the influence of Western culture, so these two challenges are intimately intertwined. This paper begins by examining Confucianism's response to Western cultural influences and then explores the contemporary reconstruction of Confucianism through a reexamination of the relationship between Mencius 孟子 [372–289 BCE] and Xunzi 荀子 [313–238 BCE].

## 1

I think that, in responding to the challenges of Western culture, the contemporary reconstruction of Confucianism has two important tasks. The first is to accept and absorb Western modernity in order to respond to the challenges of modernity. The second is to create a new Confucianism that is built upon a recognition of the value of people, in order to address the defects of modernity and the problems raised by postmodernism.

Western modernity refers largely to the twin pillars of democracy and science, as the New Culture movement aptly described. More specifically, these two ideas can be defined as democratic politics and the theory of knowledge. Accepting and absorbing these kinds of modernity has always been the goal of modern neo-Confucianism. Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 [1909–1995] aimed to create a foundation for the realization of this goal when he proposed the three aspects of orthodoxy (Confucian orthodoxy, academic orthodoxy, and political orthodoxy)<sup>1</sup> and the ideal of achieving the qualities of a sage in a modern ruler.

However, given the tensions inherent in the rapid development of the Chinese economy and the awakening of a national consciousness, Confucianism has had a countertrend that actively opposes the goals of modernity. I firmly oppose this trend, which has no place in protecting the dignity of Confucian

<sup>1</sup> Tang Xiaoxuan 唐小軒, ed., *Li Hongzhang quanji* 李鴻章全集 [*The Collected Works of Li Hong Zhang*] (Changchun: Shidai wenyi chubanshe, 1998), 19.874.

thought and could do significant damage to the development of contemporary Confucianism. The reason for this is simple. Although modern Western values have their flaws, their rationality is not up for debate, and they can make up for many of the shortcomings of Confucianism. It is no accident that Western values have been adopted by many societies around the world. In a sense, these values represent the trend of the past few decades. If Confucianism fails to follow this trend, it will stagnate and lose vitality.

How should we go about the task of accepting and absorbing Western modernity? The situation we face today is similar in many respects to the restoration of Confucianism in the Song and Ming dynasties, including the challenges posed by the introduction of foreign cultural values and the loss of traditional culture. Those of us who are concerned about the development of modern Confucianism might be able to learn something from the history of this period.

In my view, the reconstruction of Confucianism in the Song and Ming dynasties went through three distinct stages. In the first stage, scholars blindly observed the doctrines of various schools and vacillated between Daoism and Buddhism for decades.<sup>2</sup> This demonstrates the willingness of scholars of the period to learn and absorb new theories. In the second stage, scholars looked back to the Six Classics and rediscovered the Way of the sages.<sup>3</sup> They searched for the best teachings in the Confucian tradition. In the third stage, Confucians realized that, although knowledge is derived from learning, the natural order of things can be understood only through personal experience.<sup>4</sup> Scholars of this period focused on developing new intuitions based on what they had learned in the first two stages.

The contemporary reconstruction of Confucianism will likely experience three similar stages. The first will involve studying, digesting, and absorbing Western learning. The second will entail exploring the parts of the Confucian tradition that are consistent with modernity. The third stage will call for the formation of an entirely new system of philosophy.

The main challenge faced by Confucianism during the Song and Ming dynasties came from Buddhism's theory of inwardness [*xinxing lun* 心性論]. Confucianism's mission, then, was to absorb the inwardness theory and carry it forward as part of the Confucian tradition and, in doing so, use this theory as a basis for a new Confucian doctrine of temperament. In comparison, the

2 Cheng Hao 程顥 and Cheng Yi 程頤, *Er cheng ji* 二程集 [*Works of the Two Chengs*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 638.

3 *Ibid.*, 638.

4 *Ibid.*, 424.

biggest challenge facing modern Confucianism comes from democratic politics and epistemology, often considered the core values of modernity. The mission for Confucianism now is to absorb Western democratic ideas and theories of knowledge and carry them forward in the Confucian tradition, so as to make them the basis for a new, modernized Confucianism.

The question now is whether the Confucian tradition is capable of absorbing and articulating such ideas. Many believe that it is not. However, I argue that as early as 3,000 years ago, the three major civilizations in the world had already begun to think deeply about the nature of people and society and planted the roots of various philosophies. In the following 3,000 years, after the necessary conditions were met, the seeds of some of these philosophies sprouted and began to grow. In the case of Chinese civilization, the Confucian masters in the pre-Qin period planted the seeds of democratic thought and epistemology.

I also argue that the seeds of democratic thought and epistemology can be found in the philosophical tradition represented by Xunzi. Fully tapping this resource can help us achieve a modern transformation of Confucianism that responds effectively to the challenges of modernity, just as the Song and Ming neo-Confucians adapted Buddhism's inwardness theory and absorbed it into their own philosophy.

However, centuries of rapid development have made the shortcomings of modernity increasingly obvious and led to the rise of postmodern thought, which critiques the spiritual degradation, distorted values, commodification of human beings, environmental degradation, and nuclear crisis that we face as a result of modern development. Correcting these defects by upholding the subjective value of human beings is a task for the contemporary reconstruction of Confucianism.

## 2

Han Yu 韓愈 [768–824], who was the first to establish a Confucian orthodoxy and later became a pioneer of neo-Confucianism, said, “Xunzi and Yang Xiong 揚雄 [53 BCE–18] have some selections in the Confucian orthodoxy, but their thought is not precise, and their theories are not detailed.”<sup>5</sup> Xunzi was thereafter excluded from the Confucian orthodoxy and declared a heretic. If he were

5 Qu Shouyuan 屈守元 and Chang Sichun 常思春, ed., *Han Yu quanji jiaozhu* 韓愈全集校注 [Annotation to the Complete Works of Han Yu] (Chengdu: Sichuan daxue chubanshe, 1996), 2665.

truly a heretic, Xunzi's philosophy would be unsuited to the task of responding to the challenges of Western culture and reconstructing Confucianism, but Han Yu's claim is far from the truth.

Let us first examine the nature of the Way and Confucian orthodoxy. In Confucianism, the Way is the manner in which people should act – that is, the human Way. The human Way consists of two different concepts: the objective Way and the conceptual Way. The conceptual Way is a set of ideas and codes of conduct formed out of the sages' interpretations of the objective Way. According to Xunzi, *dao zhe* 道者 [the law that all people should follow]<sup>6</sup> refers to the objective Way. The “way of the gentleman”<sup>7</sup> refers to the conceptual Way. The Way, then, is a generic term for different moral categories. For example, Confucius said, “The Way of the gentleman has three aspects, none of which I have been able to follow: The benevolent and moral person does not worry, the knowledgeable person does not become confused, and the brave person is not afraid.”<sup>8</sup> But, he said, “The essence of the Way that is taught by the master is loyalty and forgiveness and nothing more.”<sup>9</sup> Zisi 子思 [483–402 BCE] said, “The relationship between the emperor and his subject, between the father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, and friends: these are the five Ways of proper human relationships that are followed by all people.”<sup>10</sup> Mencius believed that the Way essentially consisted of respecting these five relationships. He said, “The Way of Yao 堯 and Shun 舜 consists of extending the principle of filial piety and respect for one's older brother.”<sup>11</sup> Xunzi said, “What is the Way? It is ritual, justice, modesty, loyalty, and honor.”<sup>12</sup> All these descriptions are in the more specific category of the objective Way, which is the Way of the gentleman. The objective Way can be described as an endless treasure trove that followers of the Way must constantly explore. It is in this sense that Confucius said, “People must develop and promote morality; morality cannot elevate the people.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, what is known as the Confucian

6 Liang Qixiong 梁啟雄, *Xunzi jianshi* 荀子簡釋 [A Brief Explanation of Xunzi] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 82.

7 Ibid., 82.

8 Zhu Xi 朱熹, “Lunyu jizhu 論語集注 [Annotations to the Analects],” in *Si shu zhang ju jizhu* 四書章句集注 [The Texts and Annotations of the Four Books], ed. Zhu Xi (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 156.

9 Ibid., 72.

10 Zhu Xi, “Zhong yong zhang ju 中庸章句 [Text of the *Doctrine of the Mean*],” in *Si shu zhang ju jizhu*, 28.

11 Zhu Xi, “Mengzi jizhu 孟子集注 [Annotations to the Mencius],” in *Si shu zhang ju jizhu*, 339.

12 Liang Qixiong, *Xunzi jianshi*, 213.

13 Zhu Xi, “Lunyu jizhu,” 167.

orthodoxy is, in fact, the conceptual Way: it means to seek the Way of the great sages and honorable men of the past.

In the view of Confucianism, the human Way is the embodiment of the heavenly Way, so the conceptual Way is derived from the study of the relationship between man and heaven. If this is the case, then it is possible to work from top to bottom to “make inferences about the workings of the heavens in order to understand the code of conduct of human affairs.”<sup>14</sup> It is also possible to work from bottom to top to study the norms of human conduct in order to understand the laws and truth of heaven – that is, to seek the Way from the sages and honorable men of the past. These are the two basic paths to understanding the Way. The former path can be described as the “union of heaven and man” [*tian ren tong* 天人統] whereas the latter path can be called the “union of man and heaven” [*ren tian tong* 人天統].

The two origins of the Way can be traced back to two officials, Zhu 祝 and Shi 史, who are considered China’s earliest intellectuals. Zhu’s philosophy can be described as carefully studying the law of the heavens in order to understand human affairs, and we can call it the Way of heaven and man. The philosophy of Shi was the opposite; he studied human affairs in order to understand the Way of the heavens, so we can call it the Way of man and heaven. In the Six Classics, the *Book of Changes* [*Yi jing* 易經] corresponds to the tradition of Zhu, because its method of inquiry is to study the Way of the heavens in order to understand human affairs. The *Book of Songs* [*Shi jing* 詩經], the *Classic of History* [*Shu jing* 書經], the *Classic of Rites* [*Li jing* 禮經], the *Book of Music* [*Yue jing* 樂經], and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* [*Chun qiu shu* 春秋書] represent the tradition of Shi, who studied human affairs to understand the law of the heavens.

In his later years, Confucius turned his focus to the Way of heaven and man described in the *Book of Changes*. Since the beginning of the Warring States period, Confucianism had begun to split into two factions. One faction emphasized the Way of man and heaven as in the *Book of Songs*, the *Book of History*, the *Classic of Rites*, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and Confucius’ earliest teachings. It is based on the teachings of the sages and the origin of temperament and of rites and music, and it can be called the school of education or teaching. This school was created by Gongsun Nizi 公孫尼子 [fl. 5th century BCE]

14 This is a summary of the intent of the *Book of Changes* by the scholars of the *Complete Library of the Four Branches of Literature* [*siku quanshu* 四庫全書]. See Ji Yun 紀昀, “Jing bu yi, yi lei yi 經部一 易類一 [Classics Section, Part One; Book of Changes Section, Part One],” in *Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao* 四庫全書總目提要 [Summary of the General Catalogue of the Complete Library of the Four Branches of Literature] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 2000), 50.

and is represented in works such as *Human Nature Is Brought Forth by Decree* [*Xing zi ming chu* 性自命出] and *Inward Training* [*Nei ye* 內業]. It is exemplified in the works of Xunzi. The second faction focused on the Way of heaven and man exemplified by the *Book of Changes* and the philosophy of Confucius in his later years. This strand of thought argued that the will of heaven was good, and it offered a philosophy on changes in human temperament and the role of education or nurture. It can be called the school of fundamental nature. This school was founded by Zisi and is integrated into the works of Mencius.

It should be clear by now that both Mencius and Xunzi inherited and passed on not only the true teachings of Confucius but the ancient traditions that predated Confucius. During the Tang dynasty [618–907], Buddhism displaced Confucianism as the leading school of thought. The Confucian scholars who were determined to restore Confucianism to its earlier prominence understood that the theory of inwardness was what had enabled Buddhism to conquer China. They also understood that Confucianism had a rich history and philosophy and, indeed, contained the seeds of its own philosophy of inwardness that could contend with the appeal of Buddhism. The roots of this philosophy were found in none other than the school of Zisi and Mencius – that is, the philosophy of the union of heaven and man. Therefore, creating a Confucian orthodoxy that was based on the philosophy of Mencius and Xunzi was a direct response to the demands of the time.

### 3

Of course, the challenge we face today is different. Today, we are not contending with the Buddhist theory of inwardness but, rather, with the Western principles of democracy and science. We must use a different tool to address this new challenge. We must use our own tradition of democracy and science, which has its roots in Xunzi's philosophy.

What is the evidence for my argument that Xunzi's philosophy can be a bridge to the acceptance and absorption of Western philosophy? A legitimate political system often has its basis in the nature of man, and democracy is no exception. An important precondition for democracy is the acknowledgment that man is flawed and that laws, norms, and institutions are needed to address his flaws. The acceptance of the imperfect nature of man is the most important of all Xunzi's contributions.

Those who have grown up with the Chinese philosophical tradition are well acquainted with Xunzi's theory that human nature is evil. This line from Xunzi's "Human Nature Is Evil" [*Xing'e* 性惡] summarizes the theory: "Man's

fundamental nature is evil, and any good actions that he takes are borne out of effort. Indulging one's fundamental nature and following one's desires certainly will lead to contention and strife, causing one to rebel against one's proper duty, reduce principle to chaos, and revert to violence."<sup>15</sup>

If this is the case, then, how can one build a sound and harmonious society? Xunzi continues, "So it is necessary to have the teachings of a master and moral standards, and it is necessary to have justice and righteousness as a guide. In this way, the people can learn humility and respect for the rules of etiquette, and finally tend toward stability and tranquility."<sup>16</sup> It appears, then, that evil in man's fundamental nature can be curbed in two ways. The first is through the teaching of a master, and the second is through justice and righteousness. The first corresponds to education and the second to institutions. Ritual is an external code of conduct, and it plays a role similar to that of the modern-day legal system. In ancient China, ritual essentially acted as a constitution. Moral standards refer to a broader concept that includes ethics, rule by rites, the legal system, and other rules.

But what is the origin of rituals and moral standards? Xunzi said, "The ancient sage kings believed that man's nature is evil and that the people tend toward evil and cannot be rectified, so rebellions and chaos cannot be controlled. Because of this, the kings founded a system of etiquette and rites and created a legal system."<sup>17</sup> That is, rituals and moral standards all originated with the sages, a theory that is borne out by history. In Chinese history, the quintessential example is Zhou Gong's 周公 founding of the system of rites and music. In Western history, a corresponding example is perhaps the Declaration of Independence, which has long been enshrined in American history.

Equality is one of the most important elements of democracy. Although Confucianism does not advocate equality of rights, most Confucians believe in the equality of human nature and the equality of character. Xunzi wrote multiple treatises on this topic – for example, "In terms of natural endowments, natural instincts, intelligence, and talent, gentlemen are no different from the common people. They seek honor and recoil from shame; they pursue their own self-interest and abhor evil. In all these respects, gentlemen and common people are the same."<sup>18</sup> Because of this, Xunzi argued that "the com-

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15 Liang Qixiong, *Xunzi jianshi*, 327.

16 *Ibid.*, 327.

17 *Ibid.*, 328.

18 *Ibid.*, 39.



mon person on the street could become Yu,<sup>19</sup> the founder of the Xia dynasty [2100–1600 BCE].

Yet more commendable is that Xunzi believed that people could alter their social status through effort and self-cultivation: “Even the grandchildren of kings should be considered commoners if they do not observe rituals and justice, whereas the descendants of ordinary people can, through the accumulation of knowledge, correct behavior, and observance of rituals and justice, join the ranks of the scholar officials.”<sup>20</sup>

Xunzi’s philosophy of science and epistemology was even more arresting. In an era when religion and superstition were the prevailing beliefs of the day, he asserted: “When you pray to the gods for rain and it rains, why is that?” He answered: “For no particular reason, I say. It is no different from when you do not pray to the gods and it rains anyway.... It is auspicious to consider it an ornament, but it is inauspicious to consider it a spiritual act.”<sup>21</sup> Xunzi gave rational explanations for supernatural occurrences, such as: “Falling meteors and sounds made by trees, these are no more than the changes in heaven and earth and the transformations of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽. These are rare phenomena in material objects, no more.”<sup>22</sup>

In Xunzi’s opinion, the objective world followed the laws of the universe, not human will. Therefore, the objective universe could be understood. So, “What does man rely on to understand the Way? Answer: the heart. What does the heart rely on to understand the Way? Answer: it relies on humility, concentration, and meditation.”<sup>23</sup> Xunzi offered unique insights into many aspects of philosophy, including the understanding of the mind, the spiritual world of human beings, and the relationship between speech and objective reality – all of which demonstrated his interest in science and epistemology.

It bears mentioning here that Xunzi’s philosophies of democracy and science have similarities as well as differences with modern democratic thought and epistemology. This does not invalidate Xunzi’s thought. In fact, his thoughts complement modern theories of democracy and science and may even serve as a bridge for the integration of these theories into Confucianism.

19 Ibid., 334.

20 Ibid., 99.

21 Ibid., 228.

22 Ibid., 226.

23 Ibid., 294.

## 4

Unlike Xunzi, Mencius believed that human nature is good: “Sympathy is the seed of ritual, shame is the seed of righteousness, yielding is the seed of courtesy, and the knowledge of right and wrong is the seed of wisdom. People have these four seeds. It is just as natural as having four limbs.”<sup>24</sup> Mencius’ views on human nature seem to be diametrically opposed to those of Xunzi. Yet both are correct: Xunzi discovered the ugly side of human nature and Mencius the beautiful side.

The two theories of human nature are the culmination of the development of Chinese philosophy’s theories of human nature. The ancient Chinese had begun to theorize about human nature at least as early as the Shang [1600–1046 BCE] and Zhou [1046–256 BCE] dynasties, but the ideas of the time were limited to those based on personal emotional experiences – what later Confucians would have called temperament. Among the various kinds of human nature, emotion is most closely related to morality, they believed, so emotion was particularly valued. Taking this theory to its logical conclusion, one could even go so far as to say that human nature is emotion. It could also be called emotional nature.

The humanism of the Yin and Zhou dynasties was created in the early Zhou dynasty as the elites reflected on the downfall of the Xia and Shang dynasties. “The Pronouncement of Shao” [*Shao gao* 召誥] chapter in the *Book of History* [*Shangshu* 尚書] says: “It is necessary to control and improve their temperaments, so that they can become better day by day. A king must be deferential and prudent, lead by example, and respect virtue.”<sup>25</sup> Kong Anguo 孔安國 [156–74 BCE] wrote in his annotation of the *Book of History*, “One must compare oneself with the courtiers of the Yin and Zhou dynasties and constantly be restrained in temperament, avoiding mistakes in one’s behavior. In this way, public morals will be practiced daily.”<sup>26</sup> When Kong speaks of restraint, he is referring to the restraint of one’s desires. “Chief of the West’s Conquest of Li” [*Xi bo kan li* 西伯戡黎] in the *Book of History* says, “It is not that the sage rulers of ancient times were unwilling to help us, their descendants, but the king was immersed in wine and music, and so he was cut off from the sage rulers. Because of this, heaven abandoned us, and a famine befell us, and we did not

24 Zhu Xi, “Mengzi jizhu,” 238.

25 Kong Anguo 孔安國, annot., and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, collat., *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 [*Correct Interpretation of the Book of History*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2007), 585.

26 *Ibid.*, 585.

have enough to eat. This is all because we could not divine the temperament of heaven and did not respect the common law.”<sup>27</sup> If people’s nature requires control, then it must surely be bad or evil. This is the origin of Xunzi’s theory of human nature.

Of course, the good part of human nature was not entirely ignored. It was captured in the idea of “profound nature” [*hou xing* 厚性]. “Discourses of Zhou, Part 1” [*Zhouyu* 周語上] in the *Discourses of the States* [*Guoyu* 國語] says, “The ancient kings encouraged their subjects to regulate their own behavior and cultivate good character. He also provided for their material needs.” Wei Zhao’s 韋昭 [204–273] commentary on this states, “Nature is emotional nature. A profound nature is beneficial.”<sup>28</sup> In this context, making one’s nature deep or profound means to nurture and develop one’s temperament. The idea of deepening one’s nature is seen as a way of promoting morality, so in this sense human nature is seen as basically positive, even capable of transforming into something truly good. This is the origin of Mencius’ theory of human nature.

As early as the Western Zhou [1046–771 BCE] dynasty, there was an awareness that emotion has its positive and negative aspects. Mencius and Xunzi separately inherited and carried forward both sides of this theory.

It is worth noting that Mencius’ theory of human nature, like that of Xunzi, was based on the theory of human temperament. Mencius’ theory of human nature included elements such as compassion, which is itself an emotional experience. Therefore, Mencius’ theory of human nature, like Xunzi’s, was based on the theory of human temperament. The post-Confucian idea that Mencius’ theory of human nature constitutes a model of justice far removed from human emotion must be reconsidered.

If human nature is good, what is the origin of evil? Mencius argued that the culprit was the “organs of the eyes and ears,”<sup>29</sup> that is, desire. Eyes, ears, and other sensory organs do not have the ability to reason, because they are concerned with external objects. The constant interference of external objects eventually leads to depravity. Mencius said, “The body has important parts and minor parts; it has small parts and large parts. Do not damage the important parts because of the minor parts, and do not damage the big parts because of the small parts.”<sup>30</sup> Zhu Xi 朱熹 [1130–1200] said, “The minor parts are the mouth and the stomach; the important parts are the human mind and will.”<sup>31</sup>

27 Ibid., 383.

28 Xu Yuangao 徐元誥, *Guoyu jijie* 國語集解 [A Compiled Explanation of Discourses of the States] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002), 2–3, 256.

29 Zhu Xi, “Mengzi jizhu,” 335.

30 Ibid., 334.

31 Ibid., 334.

In Mencius' view, the four limbs [*si duan* 四端] do not come from an external source, and they do not require any external means. One need only recognize that they are there. This recognition was what Mencius considered to be thought: "Everyone has something in him that is worthy of respect; it is only that he has not yet pondered it."<sup>32</sup> The objects of thought are the virtues such as benevolence, justice, etiquette, and wisdom – that is, the "four limbs." The subject of thought is the heart-mind: "The duty of the heart organ is to think. It is only through thinking that the heart can perceive the true meaning of things. This organ was given to us by heaven."<sup>33</sup>

Thus, we have seen how Mencius inherited and further developed the theory of human nature that originated in the Western Zhou dynasty. He attributed the negative emotions that lead to evil to the desires of the eyes and ears and attributed the positive emotions that lead to good to the heart-mind. Mencius and Xunzi agreed on the source of evil – the eyes and the ears – but Mencius did not regard this as a part of human nature. In modern terms, the "organs of the eyes and ears" are physiological needs and the enjoyment of material goods. They are shared by humans and animals. The heart-mind, however, is the source of the spirit. It is found only in humans and is their essence.

Returning to the questions of today, we come to the uncomfortable realization that the ills of modernity were laid out by Mencius 2,000 years ago. Modernization has had obvious positive impacts in the form of material wealth, but they satisfy only the "minor organs" [*xiao ti* 小體] described by Mencius. Modernization has brought us problems as well, from spiritual loss to the distortion of values. The problem today is not only that the eyes and ears are easily distracted by external objects. It is that the "minor organs" are harming the "important organs." People pay too much attention to the cultivation of the minor organs.<sup>34</sup>

Therefore, if you want to remedy the ills of modernity, you must do as Mencius said: "If the important organs are first established, then the smaller organs cannot rob them of their goodness."<sup>35</sup> This is why the goal of the modern-day reconstruction of Confucianism is to use the philosophy of Mencius to correct the defects of modernity.

In fact, modernity and postmodernism, two seemingly incompatible trends, correspond precisely to the two types of human nature discussed by Mencius (from a modern perspective, both the important organs and the minor organs

32 Ibid., 336.

33 Ibid., 335.

34 Ibid., 335.

35 Ibid., 335.

are part of human nature). Modernity satisfies the minor organs, and postmodernism is designed to nourish the important organs. Because both are based on an understanding of human nature, both have a valid logic. Acknowledging the legitimacy of both philosophies while working to correct and overcome their shortcomings is the path forward: we must simultaneously use Xunzi to understand how to absorb modernity and use Mencius to understand how to correct it. Only by integrating the two philosophies can we establish a new era of Confucianism.

*Translated by Colleen Howe*

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