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# Beyond Respecting Mencius and Criticizing Xunzi: A Return to Equal Status for the Two Sages

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## Abstract

Mencius 孟子 took Confucius' idea of benevolence and, based on it, developed his theory that human nature is good. Xunzi 荀子 emphasized Confucius' idea of ritual propriety and developed his theory that human nature is bad. This juxtaposition largely came to define their philosophies and their place in the history of Confucianism. Reconciling the two has been a point of contention ever since the Han dynasty. By the end of the Han dynasty, the scales had tipped in favor of Mencius, and this favoritism continued through the Six Dynasties era, the Tang and Song dynasties and beyond. As the *Mencius* became canonized, the *Xunzi* fell further out of favor with academics. Through all this, there have still been attempts to directly reconcile and even combine the two branches of Confucianism. This is an important cultural enterprise, which has gained new force in recent years. This article threads out some of the more important arguments in this continuing discussion and advocates for viewing the two branches with equal import and authority in the Confucian tradition.

## Keywords

Confucianism – Mencius – political philosophy – reconciliation – Xunzi

1

If Socrates [469–399 BCE] was the father of Western philosophy, Plato [427–347 BCE] and Aristotle [384–322 BCE] were the two greats. The German

poet Heinrich Heine [1797–1856] once described the relationship between them as follows:

Plato and Aristotle! These are not merely two systems; they are two distinct types of human nature, which, from time immemorial, under every sort of disguise, stand more or less inimically opposed. The whole mediæval world in particular was riven by this conflict, which persists down to the present day.... although under other names, it is always of Plato and Aristotle that we speak. Visionary, mystical, Platonic natures ... practical, orderly, Aristotelian natures.<sup>1</sup>

In Heine's view, Plato and Aristotle did not merely represent two different doctrines. More than that, they represented two different types of human nature and the understandings of life and the universe bound up in those two types. Plato and Aristotle had their differences; indeed, they contradicted each other at times, yet each is indispensable in the history of Western philosophy. One could say that the history of Western philosophy is a footnote to Plato and Aristotle.

China, like the West, has a canonical triumvirate: after Confucius 孔子 [551–479 BCE] came Mencius 孟子 [c. 372–289 BCE] and Xunzi 荀子 [c. 313–238 BCE]. Like Plato and Aristotle before them, Mencius and Xunzi have come to represent two important traditions in the history of China's Confucian philosophy. Confucius' philosophy centered on the core virtues of benevolence [*ren* 仁] and ritual [*li* 禮], and he made unifying the two his life's mission. Mencius focused on the virtue of benevolence. He proposed that human nature is intrinsically benevolent, which became the basis for the Confucian theory of human nature. This theory advocates that a sage regard goodness as his innate nature, cultivate the vastness of his life force, lift up and expand the human spirit, and “govern compassionately by following the compassion in his heart”<sup>2</sup> and the principle of morality.

Xunzi took the opposite view. He was more concerned with the formation of the rituals of society. He formulated a “natural” theory of human nature, which he believed was motivated largely by two elements: desire and intelligence. On the one hand, desire is evil; it explains the strife and chaos in society.

1 Heinrich Heine, *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland* 論德國宗教和哲學的歷史 [*The History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*], trans. Hai An 海安 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshu guan, 2000), 63.

2 Zhao Qi 趙岐, annot., and Sun Shi 孫奭, collat., *Mengzi zhushu* 孟子注疏 [*Annotations on Mengzi*] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), 112.

On the other hand, intelligence, or artifice, drives sages to create rituals and righteousness and bring about social order, all of which are good. By engaging in rituals and righteousness, the essential nature of man is transformed through artifice, and goodness is accumulated until it becomes virtue, and the country is governed through a system of rituals, Xunzi believed. This was the path to moral governance.

It is not difficult to see that both Mencius and Xunzi represent the inheritance of Confucian thought, though they developed two distinct traditions within Confucian philosophy. Reconciling the two traditions would become an important question for later scholars. After the Qin [221–207 BCE] and Han [202 BCE–220] dynasties, two different schools of thought emerged around the question of the roles of Mencius and Xunzi and the relationship between the two. The first school put Mencius and Xunzi on an equal footing, acknowledging the differences in their thinking while affirming both of their contributions to Confucianism. The second school emphasized the teachings of Mencius and gave less weight to the philosophy of Xunzi. This latter school of thought later emerged as the predominant view, because the influence of the Cheng–Zhu tradition of neo-Confucianism and the Taiwan and Hong Kong schools of neo-Confucianism. However, this article argues that, from a historical perspective, the tradition that viewed Mencius and Xunzi as philosophical equals has earlier roots and, indeed, has proved the more enduring tradition. This school also has stronger interpretive power and should be considered the basic model in Confucian studies going forward.

## 2

The Han dynasty was an important period in the development of Confucianism. In the *Records of the Grand Historian* [*Shiji* 史記], by the historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 [145–90 BCE], Mencius and Xunzi appear together in a collective biography. Sima Qian wrote, “Search the Confucian and Mohist literature to understand the meaning and principle of the system of rituals, do away with King Hui of Liang’s search for what would profit his country, and analyze the flourishing and the decline of generations past.”<sup>3</sup> The mention of rituals is a reference to Xunzi, whereas the reference to rejecting the search for profit is a nod to Mencius. These themes were the core questions of Confucian inquiry during the Han dynasty.

3 Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 [*Records of the Grand Historian*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1963), 10.3314.

Confucianism was restored and redefined during the Han dynasty with a focus on two specific aspects. The first was using Confucianism to critique the violent, autocratic nature of the Qin dynasty. The second involved reflecting on the ongoing chaos and unrest of the Warring States period [475–221 BCE] and the early Han dynasty and contemplating how to create an enduring system of rituals to preserve social order. In this sense, Mencius and Xunzi came at the right time because they provided the intellectual foundations for answering this question. This is why Sima Qian wrote a collective biography of them. In “Biographies of Confucian Scholars” [*Rulin liezhuan* 儒林列傳], he wrote, “However, in the regions of Qi and Lu, the educated people did not forsake the Confucian way of benevolence and righteousness. During the era of King Wei of Qi 齊威王 [r. 356–320 BCE] and King Xuan of Qi 齊宣王 [r. 320–301], figures such as Mencius and Xunzi adhered to the teachings of Confucius and added their own teachings. Through these teachings, they built a reputation for themselves.”<sup>4</sup>

Mencius and Xunzi were both considered successors of Confucius and developed his philosophy further. This is another reason that the two were often spoken of together and viewed as equals. Liang Yusheng 梁玉繩 [1745–1819], a Qing dynasty [1644–1911] scholar, said, “Confucius and Mencius were spoken of together beginning as early as the Warring States period. It was Han dynasty Confucians who began to speak of Mencius and Xunzi together.”<sup>5</sup> From a philosophical perspective, Han dynasty Confucians—such as Lu Jia 陸賈 [c. 240–170 BCE], Jia Yi 賈誼 [200–168 BCE], Han Ying 韓嬰 [200–130 BCE], Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 [179–104 BCE], and Liu Xiang 劉向 [77–6 BCE]—were all influenced by both Mencius and Xunzi. Generally, they followed Mencius’ philosophy of benevolence and righteousness but were more influenced by Xunzi’s philosophy of rituals and governance.

Some scholars, such as Han Ying and Dong Zhongshu, attempted to reconcile Xunzi’s and Mencius’ theories of human nature. Han’s *Exoteric Traditions of the Han Version of the Songs* [*Hanshi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳] quoted more than forty lines from Xunzi’s writings and deeply reflected his influence. However, Han’s theory of human nature is closer to that of Mencius, rejecting Xunzi’s belief that human nature is innately evil. But although Han argues that human nature is good, he believes that goodness is something like a cocoon or an egg; it is acquired through education and cultivation: “Although man’s nature is good, unless he receives help from a sage to put him on the path of the *dao*,

4 Ibid., 10.3116.

5 Liang Yusheng 梁玉繩, *Shiji zhiyi* 史記志疑 [*Collation on Records of the Grand Historian*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 36.1481.

he will not become a sage himself.”<sup>6</sup> This represents a clear attempt by Han to integrate Xunzi’s and Mencius’ theories of human nature.

The equal status of Mencius and Xunzi during this period is also reflected in the Salt and Iron conference [*yan tie huiyi* 鹽鐵會議], which took place during the middle of the Western Han dynasty [202 BCE–8]. Significantly, the Salt and Iron conference marked the emergence of Confucians as a political force. It is noteworthy that the scholars in attendance at the conference cited many of Mencius’ remarks on benevolent governance, benefiting the people, and other topics; they also quoted the works of Xunzi and directly referred to Xunzi himself. This indicates that the philosophies of Mencius and Xunzi had become ideological tools used by the literary elite to criticize the government policies of the time. The *Book of Han* [*Hanshu* 漢書], written by Ban Gu 班固 [32–92] in the Eastern Han dynasty [25–220] and representing the intellectual inheritance of *Records of the Grand Historian*, continued to refer to Mencius and Xunzi as philosophical equals, indicating that this view persisted in the Eastern Han period.

Although the equal status of the two greats remained the prevailing philosophy throughout the Western and Eastern Han periods, the relative influence of the two philosophers subtly shifted. The neo-Confucian Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 [1903–1982] said, “The general view during the early Western Han period was that Xunzi was more influential than Mencius.”<sup>7</sup> Lu Jia, Jia Yi, Han Ying, and others were clearly more influenced by Xunzi than by Mencius. But by the time of the Salt and Iron conference, Mencius’ influence had increased steadily, to the point that his reputation appeared to be overtaking that of Xunzi. At the end of the Western Han period, Yang Xiong 揚雄 [53 BCE–18] was a clear proponent of Mencius. Yang admired the Six Classics; he viewed the later scholars of the Qin and Han dynasties with contempt because their views differed from those of Confucius, whereas Mencius, he believed, was ideologically indistinguishable from Confucius. Yang described his own relationship to the philosophy of Xunzi in the following way: “Xunzi and I are like two individuals who share a common front door and courtyard, but do not live in the same room.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, he considered Xunzi a disciple of Confucius, but not in the same way that Mencius was a disciple of Confucius; Mencius’ philosophy was somehow purer.

6 Qu Shouyuan 屈守元, *Hanshi waizhuan jianshu* 韓詩外傳箋疏 [*Commentaries on Exoteric Traditions of the Han Version of the Songs*] (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 1996), 476.

7 Xu Fuguan 徐復觀, *Lianghan sixiang shi* 兩漢思想史 [*Intellectual History of the Han Dynasty*] (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2001), 2.310.

8 Ji Guotai 紀國泰, *Yangzi fayan jindu* 《揚子法言》今讀 [*A Modern Reading of Yangzi’s Fayan*] (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 2010), 352.

Yang's views on Mencius and Confucius later influenced the Tang dynasty [618–907] scholar Han Yu 韓愈 [768–824]. In the context of the history of Confucianism, Han is considered an advocate of Mencian philosophy, and he had a great influence on the later Song [960–1279] and Ming [1368–1644] neo-Confucians. However, Han does not necessarily represent the prevailing thought of the Tang era. He admitted that his admiration for Mencius was a product of Yang's influence:

It was not until I read Mencius' books that I realized how noble is the way of Confucius.... Later, after reading the works of Yang Xiong, my respect for the doctrine of Mencius only grew.... I had not heard of Xunzi until later, when I came across his books. A careful examination of Xunzi's words reveals that at times they seem to be not quite pure and correct, but if one seeks to understand Xunzi's purpose, he will find that there is little that is inconsistent with the philosophy of Confucius.<sup>9</sup>

Han Yu's evaluation of Xunzi was as follows: "Mencius is ideologically pure; Xunzi and Yang Xiong are pure overall, but both have their small flaws."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, although at that time Han criticized Xunzi for being insufficiently ideologically pure, he also believed that Xunzi's differences from Confucius amounted to only small flaws.

But in later works it seemed that Han's opinion of Xunzi had evolved since his earlier writings. Han wrote in a later work that Confucianism had its own orthodoxy, which was passed down from the ancient kings Yao 堯, Shun 舜, Yu 禹, Tang 湯, Wen 文, Wu 武, and Zhou Gong 周公 to Confucius, but "from Confucius, these teachings were passed down to Mencius, and after the death of Mencius they were lost."<sup>11</sup> Han also wrote of Confucius: "Some of the selections he made did not capture the essence of the way, and he wrote some discourses, but they were not complete."<sup>12</sup> Han excluded these discourses from the Confucian orthodoxy that he developed, reflecting again the preference among scholars at that time for Mencius.

But shortly after Han began to support Confucian orthodoxy and the elevation of Mencius, Yang Liang 楊儵 [fl. 823], who annotated the *Xunzi*, still insisted on the equal status of Mencius and Xunzi:

9 Han Yu 韓愈, *Han Yu quanji* 韓愈全集 [*The Complete Works of Han Yu*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), 128.

10 *Ibid.*, 128.

11 *Ibid.*, 120.

12 *Ibid.*, 120.

After Confucius revised the rituals and the music and wrote the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the traditions of the Xia [c. 2100–1600 BCE], Shang [1600–1400 BCE], and Zhou [1046–256 BCE] dynasties were relaxed and then revived once more.... Mencius was the first to interpret them, and then Xunzi made a great fanfare about it.... They were truly great scholars, the teachers of the kings.... The situation was more or less as follows: Zhou Gong was the creator of the knowledge; Confucius was the one who inherited and spread the knowledge; and Mencius and Xunzi made their own contributions to the knowledge. The way of the king, which they established, is exceedingly deep and complete.<sup>13</sup>

According to the textual research of Zhou Chicheng 周熾成, Yang Liang annotated the *Xunzi* after Han Yu wrote “The Original Way” [*Yuan dao* 原道], and that comment might well be a response to Han:

In the view of Yang Liang, Xunzi and Mencius both represented the inheritance of the Confucian orthodoxy of Zhou Gong and Confucius; this differed from the view of Han Yu, who excluded Xunzi from categorization within Confucian orthodoxy entirely.... Han Yu sought to carry on the tradition of Mencius, while Yang Liang sought to carry on the tradition of Xunzi.<sup>14</sup>

In sum, Mencius and Xunzi were considered equal in merit during the Tang dynasty, according to the works of even those such as Han Yu, who were personally disposed toward Mencian philosophy.

In “Explanation Upon Entering the Academy” [*Jinxue jie* 進學解], Han wrote:

Mencius loved to debate, and through debate upon various topics the Confucian way was clarified. He also traveled from country to country and spent his life in this way. Xunzi upheld the righteous way and helped the great thought of Confucius achieve wider recognition. While in the state of Chu, Xunzi met with libel and slander and so he fled, and

13 Wang Xianqian 王先謙, *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解 [*Collected Interpretations on Xunzi*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), 63.

14 Zhou Chicheng 周熾成, “Cong xian Xun hou Meng zhishuo kan Han Tang Xun Meng guanxi yiji Xunzi zai Ruxue zhong de diwei 從先荀後孟之說看漢唐荀孟關係以及荀子在儒學中的地位 [The Relationship between Mencius and Xunzi in Han and Tang Dynasties and the Position of Xunzi in Confucianism Based on the Theory of Putting Xunzi Before Mencius],” *Shehui kexue* 社會科學, no. 5 (2017).

ultimately died in Lanling without any official title. The words of these two Confucians are considered scriptures, and their behavior could be held up as a model for others. They are both outstanding in character, enough so to be considered among the ranks of the sages.<sup>15</sup>

Here Han Yu not only mentions Mencius and Confucius in the same instance but he also recognizes that both have attained the status of sages, which differs markedly from Han's preferential attitude toward Mencius in his later work "Yuan dao." This shows that at one point Han accepted that Mencius and Xunzi had equal merit. However, out of a desire to criticize the competing philosophies of Buddhism and Daoism, he later grew to admire Mencius, who spared no effort in repudiating Mozi 墨子 [c. 468–376 BCE] and Yang Zhu 楊朱 [c. 395–335 BCE]. Similarly, he had reservations about Xunzi, who worked to integrate hundreds of different schools of thought. Therefore, although Han thought Mencius was more meritorious than Xunzi and, indeed, Mencian thought became increasingly influential over the course of the Tang dynasty, the philosophy of Xunzi retained significant influence. Han's contemporaries Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 [773–819], Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 [772–842], and others emphasized the philosophy of Xunzi and were influenced by his theory of the distinct spheres of nature and man.<sup>16</sup>

### 3

During the Song dynasty, the stature of Mencian philosophy continued to rise, largely due to an increase in interest in the orthodox Confucian classics. But Mencius and Xunzi were both influential during this period. As the Song philosopher Sun Fu 孫復 [992–1057] said, "What I refer to as the Dao is the wisdom of Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen, Wu, Zhou Gong, and Confucius, and it is also the wisdom of Mencius, Xunzi, Yang Xiong, Wang Tong 王通 [503–574], and Han Yu." Shi Jie 石介 [1005–1045] held a similar view, noting that the inheritors of Confucius' wisdom were "the five sages, Mencius, Xunzi, Yang Xiong, Wang Tong, and Han Yu."<sup>17</sup> This statement, markedly different from the views of Han Yu, shows that Shi Jie believed Mencius and Xunzi were equal

15 Han Yu, *Han Yu quanji*, 131.

16 See Ma Jigao 馬積高, *Xunxue yuanliu* 荀學源流 [*Origin of Xunzi's Study*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2000), 233–43.

17 Shi Jie 石介, *Cu Laishi xiansheng wenji* 徂徠石先生文集 [*Collected Works of Cu Laishi*], vol. 7, Siku Wenyuan Pavilion Edition.

in merit. This version of Confucian orthodoxy, emphasizing the five sages, was most influential during the Northern Song dynasty [960–1127], when a “Five Sages Hall” [*wuxian tang* 五賢堂] was built in the temple of Confucius at Yanzhou 兗州. During this time, Han Qi 韓琦 [1008–1075] also wrote his “Praise of the Five Sages.”<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the five sages, Zeng Gong 曾鞏 [1019–1083], Su Xun 蘇洵 [1009–1066], and others spoke of the “four gentlemen” [*si junzi* 四君子]. Zeng Gong once said,

After the death of Confucius, there were many men who toured the country spreading clever sayings and heretical philosophies. If you want to truly understand the way of the sages, there is no better way than to read the books of the four gentlemen, Mencius, Xunzi, Yang Xiong, and Han Yu. If you do not, your understanding will be only superficial.<sup>19</sup>

Su Xun said,

More than a hundred years after the death of Confucius, Mencius was born; decades after the death of Mencius, Xunzi was born; after Xunzi's death, there was a long gap of over two hundred years before the next great figure, Yang Xiong, appeared. After Yang Xiong's death, there was no one to carry on the Confucian orthodoxy for over a thousand years, until the time of Han Yu.<sup>20</sup>

The idea that the two were essentially equal continued to enjoy broad acceptance among scholars of the period, with Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 [1007–1072] representing just one example. Ouyang admired Mencius, saying, “After Confucius, it was Mencius who best understood the Way.”<sup>21</sup> But he also

18 Liu Tao 劉濤, “Songdai xunxue yanjiu 宋代荀學研究 [Research on Xunzi's Study in the Song Dynasty]” (PhD dissertation, Zhongshan University, 2010), 26–28.

19 Zeng Gong 曾鞏, “Shang Ouyang xueshi diyi shu 上歐陽學士第一書 [The First Letter to Ouyang Xiu],” in *Zeng Gong ji* 曾鞏集 [*The Collected Works of Zeng Gong*], ed. Chen Xingzhen 陳杏珍 and Chao Jizhou 晁繼周 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 231.

20 Su Xun 蘇洵, “Shang Ouyang neihan dier shu 上歐陽內翰第二書 [The Second Letter to Ouyang Xiu],” in *San su quan shu* 三蘇全書 [*Complete Works of Su Xun, Su Shi, and Su Zhe*], ed. Zeng Zaozhuang 曾棗莊 and Shu Dagang 舒大剛 (Beijing: Yuwen chubanshe, 2001).

21 Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, “Yu Zhang xiucai dier shu 與張秀才第二書 [The Second Letter to Scholar Zhang],” in *Ouyang Xiu ji biannian jianzhu* 歐陽修集編年箋注 [*Annotations on the Chronology of Ouyang Xiu's Works*], ed. Li Zhiliang 李之亮 (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 2007), 4.250.

acknowledged Xunzi: "Of the great Han dynasty scholars such as Jia Yi and Sima Qian, there were none who did not fully respect the doctrine of Xunzi. This is because the doctrine of Xunzi was the closest to the way of the sages."<sup>22</sup> Clearly, his views on the respective merits of Mencius and Xunzi fundamentally differed from those of Han Yu.

However, the school of thought that elevated Mencius over Xunzi also developed further during the Northern Song period; this is particularly evident among the neo-Confucians. As Zhang Zai 張載 [1020–1077] wrote,

The ancient scholars regarded establishing Heaven's law in their hearts as their primary principle. After the death of Confucius, the essence of his thought was lost because the scholars such as Xunzi and Yang Xiong did not know this primary principle.... After Confucius and Mencius, Xunzi, Yang Xiong, Wang Tong, and Han Yu did not reach the level of a sage in their knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

Cheng Hao 程顥 [1032–1085] and Cheng Yi 程頤 [1033–1107] wrote in *The Collected Works of Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi* [*Er Cheng ji* 二程集],

After the death of Confucius, the doctrine of Zengzi [505–435 BCE] became increasingly prominent. After the death of Confucius, Zengzi was the only one who had a legitimate claim to having carried on the teachings of Confucius. Zengzi passed on the Way of Confucius to Zisi [483–402 BCE]; Zisi passed it on to Mencius, which caused him to become even more respected. But after the death of Mencius, there was no one to carry on the Way.<sup>24</sup>

Zhu Xi 朱熹 [1130–1200] said: "The Way was passed down from Confucius to Mencius, and after Mencius died, there was no one to carry it on. It is difficult to believe this unless you have a deep understanding of the Way. What exactly did Mencius carry on? The answer is benevolence and justice."<sup>25</sup> These

22 Ouyang Xiu, "Zheng Xun gaiming xu 鄭荀改名序 [Preface to the Name Changing of Zheng Xun]," in *Ouyang Xiu ji biannian jianzhu*, 148.

23 Zhang Zai 張載, *Zhang Zai ji* 張載集 [*The Collected Works of Zhang Zai*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1978), 273, 373.

24 Cheng Hao 程顥 and Cheng Yi 程頤, *Er Cheng ji* 二程集 [*Collected Works of Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 384.

25 Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Zhu zi quanshu: Zazhu* 朱子全書 雜著 [*Completed Works of Zhuzi: Miscellaneous Works*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe; Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002), 3525.

scholars believed that Mencius was the only one to pass on the true Way of Confucius, distinguishing Mencius from Xunzi. Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi wrote, “Mencius contributed to the creation and passing down of the Way, making him an eternal teacher of the way, [but] Xunzi’s doctrine is biased, and it is not pure. His theory that man’s nature is evil alone is enough to show that he has not grasped the fundamentals of the Way.”<sup>26</sup> Zhu Xi said: “There is no need to study Xunzi; the study of Mencius will suffice. Xunzi clearly does not have a complete understanding of the Way and the principle.”<sup>27</sup> Zhu Xi clearly thought more highly of Mencius than of Xunzi. In this respect, the neo-Confucians were broadly similar to Han Yu, but with certain differences. The neo-Confucians disagreed with Han’s view that Xunzi was correct overall, with only small defects [*da chun xiao ci* 大醇小疵]:

Although Xunzi had great talent, he made many mistakes in his scholarly work. Yang Xiong was not as talented, but he made fewer mistakes in his thinking. Han Yu called Xunzi “pure overall” [*da chun*], which is an incorrect judgment. In fact, Mencius and Xunzi are overall quite different. Han Yu’s evaluation can be explained by his magnanimity in evaluating the character of men.<sup>28</sup>

Xunzi was not, indeed, pure overall; rather, he had many contradictions.

During the Northern Song dynasty, the neo-Confucian Guan 關 and Luo 洛 schools were only folk traditions. However, Wang Anshi’s 王安石 [1021–1086] new school was truly influential and had the government’s ear. For this reason, it is also worth considering Wang’s views on Mencius and Xunzi. On the basis of his writings, the academic world generally believes that Wang was a proponent of Mencian philosophy, and this view is not without reason, considering that he publicly praised Mencius and considered him a lifelong friend. For example, Wang once wrote, “The compiled work *Huai nan zi* was very popular at the time; all the scholars admired it very much and mentioned it together with the works of Mencius.”<sup>29</sup> But on a deeper inspection of Wang’s philosophy, particularly his writings on legal reform, it becomes clear that he was more strongly influenced by Xunzi. For example, he subscribes to the theory of natural human nature, attaches importance to human perception, and

26 Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, *Er Cheng ji*, 76, 262.

27 Li Jingde 黎靖德, ed., *Zhuzi yu lei* 朱子語類 [A Collection of Zhuzi’s Sayings] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 8.3254.

28 Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, *Er Cheng ji*, 282.

29 Ma Yongqing 馬永卿, *Yuan cheng yǔlù* 元城語錄 [A Collection of Yuancheng’s Sayings], part 1, Siku Wenxuan Pavilion edition.

reaches universal conclusions from the perceptions and the nature of individuals. Yet he believes that the essence of both the universal and the individual can coexist, and their coexistence is the basis for the system of music and rituals. He was most concerned with issues concerning the production of wealth and the distribution of the resulting benefits. According to one view, “Although Wang Anshi both misunderstood and criticized Xunzi and, at one point, was closer in his philosophy to Mencius, ultimately, his thought can be characterized as the intellectual inheritance of Confucius and Xunzi, not Mencius.”<sup>30</sup> In the words of Li Zehou 李澤厚, Wang “raised the flag of Mencius, but practiced the doctrine of Xunzi.”<sup>31</sup>

Wang habitually referred to the study of Xunzi [*Xun xue* 荀學], rather than speaking of Xunzi himself, much like Li Gou 李覲 [1009–1059]. Li placed great importance on ritual, music, and criminal law, and ritual was at the core of much of his philosophy. But when describing the source of his philosophy, Li mentioned only the *Book of Rites* [*Li ji* 禮記], the *Rites of the Zhou* [*Zhou li* 周禮], the *Zuo Commentary* [*Zuo zhuan* 左傳], and *The Analects* [*Lunyu* 論語], but none of the works of Xunzi. Xia Changpu 夏長樸 wrote, “Comparing Li Gou’s treatises with Xunzi’s admiration of rituals [*long li*], you will find that the two share quite a few similarities in their views on rituals. This is by no means accidental, yet Li Gou mentions Xunzi only twice in his collected works, which is puzzling.”<sup>32</sup> He also wrote, “Li Gou never discussed Xunzi’s theory of ritual, yet it was the source for his own theory of ritual.... This is a phenomenon that we must consider seriously when studying Li Gou’s thought.”<sup>33</sup>

This phenomenon that Xia Changpu points out, I term “the invisibility of Xunzi”. Some scholars consciously or unconsciously accept and use Xunzi’s thought, but omit or deliberately avoid mentioning Xunzi. This occurred for several reasons. First, at that time, there were many misunderstandings about Xunzi’s theory of human nature. Some believed the theory advocated for a view of human nature as unequivocally evil, denying human moral subjectivity, which was not in line with the Confucian orthodoxy of the time.

30 See Liang Tao 梁濤, “Wang Anshi zhengzhi zhaxue fawei 王安石政治哲學發微 [Detailed Explanation of Wang Anshi’s Political Philosophy],” *Beijing shifan daxue xuebao* 北京師範大學學報, no. 3 (2016).

31 Li Zehou 李澤厚, “Ju mengqi, xing xunxue: Wei Lunlixue gangyao yibian 舉孟旗行荀學—為《倫理學綱要》一辯 [Raise the Mencian Banner, Practice the Xunzian Philosophy: Defense for *The Essentials of Ethics*],” *Tansuo yu zhengming* 探索與爭鳴, no. 4 (2017).

32 Xia Changpu 夏長樸, *Li Gou yu Wang Anshi yanjiu* 李覲與王安石研究 [Research on Li Gou and Wang Anshi] (Taipei: Taiwan Da’an chubanshe, 1989), 19.

33 *Ibid.* 26.

Second, Xunzi's "Criticizing Twelve Masters" [*Fei shier zi* 非十二子] criticized Zisi and Mencius around the time that Mencian philosophy increased in stature and drew praise from scholars, making Xunzi's criticism of Mencius appear unreasonable. Third, Xunzi was a mentor to Li Si 李斯 [284–208 BCE] and Han Fei 韓非 [280–233 BCE], leading Xunzi himself to be called a Legalist and rejected on that basis. The invisibility of Xunzi is an important phenomenon in the history of Confucianism that is worthy of serious study. This phenomenon demonstrates that even in the periods when Xunzi's philosophy received criticism, it did not disappear from Confucian philosophy entirely but, rather, persisted in a changed form, which explains how Xunzi's philosophy continued to exert its influence on Confucianism. This phenomenon has a historical explanation. Confucianism in the Northern Song dynasty was focused on two aims: reviving the ritual and music of the kings of Xia, Shang, and Zhou in order to rebuild the social and political order and elucidating the Confucian theory of moral life in response to challenges from Buddhism and Daoism. The former goal was obviously more closely related to the philosophy of Xunzi, while Mencian philosophy attracted attention because of its relation to the latter theme. In the early part of the Northern Song dynasty, there was a strong focus on issues of governance. After the emperors Shenzong [r. 1067–1085] and Xining [1068–1077], moral life became a topic of interest among scholars. Therefore, the study of Xunzi and Mencius went through a process of ebb and flow.

After the Southern Song dynasty [1127–1279], Cheng–Zhu neo-Confucianism received official recognition, and the preeminence of Mencian philosophy finally became mainstream in academic circles. The *Mencius* became part of the Confucian scriptures, while *The Xunzi* was no longer considered among the Confucian classics and was even removed from the Confucian temple during the Ming dynasty [1368–1644]. During this period, although some scholars continued to defend Xunzi, they made little headway in mainstream academic circles, and Xunzi's philosophy was relegated to the role of invisible influence.

#### 4

The official ideology of the Qing dynasty was Cheng–Zhu neo-Confucianism, so admiring Mencius and denigrating Xunzi was elevated to the status of official policy. But, at the same time, the voices calling for the equal status of Mencius and Confucius persisted, even if very faintly, beginning with Fu Shan 傅山 [1607–1684] and Fei Mi 費密 [1623–1699] in the early Qing dynasty and reaching a peak in the Qianjia 乾嘉 period [1736–1820]. An important theme of Qing

dynasty Confucianism was reflecting on the errors of neo-Confucianism and restoring the systems of ritual and music based on the affirmation of human perceptual life. Xunzi emphasized rituals and called on people to pursue both righteousness and individual benefit. He attached importance to the role of reason yet did not deny emotional desires and, indeed, provided a philosophical explanation of such desires. For these reasons, Xunzi's philosophy was highly valued, and many called for him to be considered as the equal of Mencius.

Some scholars in the Qianjia period returned to a philosophy encompassing the thought of both Mencius and Xunzi. Some achieved this via Wang Anshi's practice of "flying the flag of Mencius while practicing the doctrine of Xunzi." Although the ideas advocated by these scholars were nominally those of Mencius, in fact most of them originated in the thought of Xunzi. However, others were more open in their defense of Xunzi.

Dai Zhen 戴震 [1724–1777] was among those who demonstrated the influence of Xunzi less explicitly. His *On the Meaning of Mencius* [*Mengzi ziyi shuzheng* 孟子字義疏證] on the surface is an interpretation of *The Mencius*, but his theory of human nature argues that the body is the basis of consciousness and that rationality and desire can coexist. This is similar to Xunzi's epistemology, which advocated for the importance of both righteousness and material gain and emphasized both emotion and knowledge. For this reason, modern scholars generally believe that whereas Dai "borrowed the name of Mencius,"<sup>34</sup> in the words of Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 [1869–1936], his thought is more closely related to that of Xunzi. Although he concurs with Mencius' view that human nature is good, Dai Zhen's commentary on human nature again is more closely related to the doctrine of Xunzi.<sup>35</sup>

Another group of scholars supported the philosophy of Xunzi more directly through a textual analysis of his works. As Xie Yong 謝墉 [1719–1795] said,

Xunzi appeared after the time of Mencius; he was the most important Confucian teacher in the Warring States period. When Sima Qian wrote the collective biographies of hundreds of scholars, he took special care to compare Mencius and Xunzi. It can be said that Mencius and Xunzi were compared from the last years of the Zhou dynasty through the Qin and

34 Zhang Taiyan 章太炎, *Taiyan wenlu chubian* 太炎文錄初編 [*Compilation of Taiyan's Literature*] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2014), 123.

35 Qian Mu 錢穆, *Zhongguo jin sanbainian xueshushi* 中國近三百年學術史 [*The Academic History of China in the Past Three Hundred Years*] (Beijing: Jiuzhou chubanshe, 2011), 388.

Han dynasties. I have read all of Xunzi, and I know that Xunzi's theory is pure and his language is rich and fluent.<sup>36</sup>

Here, Xie Yong shows that the close comparisons between Mencius and Xunzi have a long history. Xie Yong also agrees with those who argue Xunzi's philosophy is "pure overall" with only small flaws.

Xunzi's discussion of whether human nature is fundamentally good or evil has become one of the greatest points of contention in the history of Confucianism: the reason that the neo-Confucians preferred Mencius over Confucius had much to do with their rejection of Xunzi's theory of human nature. However, Hao Yixing 郝懿行 [1757–1825] wrote,

Mencius and Xunzi have the same purpose. As for whether human nature is basically good or evil, there is no fundamental difference between the two. Even if you believe that human nature is good, you cannot do away with the need to teach and cultivate human nature. Even if you believe human nature is evil, you cannot forget the role of free will and one's individual efforts. On the question of purpose, there is no contradiction between the two. They simply emphasized different aspects of the same philosophy in their teachings.<sup>37</sup>

Qian Daxin 錢大昕 [1728–1804] echoed this sentiment when he wrote,

In my opinion, Mencius' argument that human nature is good is in the hope that people can give full expression to their relevant abilities, so as to be happy in order to do good. Xunzi's argument that human nature is evil is in the hope that people can transform their inherent negative tendencies, so as to work hard in order to do good. Although the two have differences of opinion, they are united on the need to teach people to be good.<sup>38</sup>

Qian also wrote,

When Song dynasty Confucians spoke of human nature, they considered Mencius' theory of human nature to be the standard. But in practice,

36 Wang Xianqian 王先謙, *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解 [*The Collected Interpretations on Xunzi*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1954), 8.

37 *Ibid.*, 10–11.

38 *Ibid.*, 10.

they distinguished two different types of human nature: the nature of justice and rationality and the nature of temperament. In doing so, they combined the doctrines of Mencius and Xunzi. They educated people in how to improve their own temperament, an idea that has its basis in Xunzi's theory of transforming the unhealthy tendencies in one's inherent nature.<sup>39</sup>

Thus it can be said that the Song Confucians' concept of temperament, in fact, comes from Xunzi.

Some scholars, such as Ling Tingkan 凌廷堪 [1757–1809], argued that reason could be used to restrict and stifle people, and, instead, they advocated for using ritual to replace reason. For this reason, they placed particular emphasis on Xunzi's contributions to the study of ritual:

The only people who can preserve the Way of the sages are Mencius and Xunzi. Mencius' scholarly expertise was in the *Book of Songs* [*Shijing* 詩經] and the *Book of History* [*Shangshu* 尚書], and the seven volumes in the *Mencius* quote these works many times. As for the *Book of Rites*, Mencius indicated only that he had heard of it. He likely was familiar only with the main aspects of ritual from this book. Xunzi's books, however, often retold stories from the *Book of Rites*. These stories often explain the essence of ritual. Therefore, Xunzi's doctrine in no way violates the aim of the sages. When later scholars respect Mencius and criticize Xunzi, then, are they not alienating themselves from ritual law?<sup>40</sup>

Mencius only understood the overall idea of the theory of rituals, while Xunzi truly described the essence of rituals. Therefore, from the perspective of the study of ritual, Xunzi's philosophy was consistent with that of Confucius. Wang Zhong 汪中 [1744–1794] undertook a detailed study of Xunzi's life and affirmed Xunzi's contributions to the study of the classics: "Xunzi's doctrine originated with Confucius, and he was credited with interpreting various Confucian scriptures.... The fact that the 'six arts' of Confucianism were able to be passed down is owing to Xunzi. Zhou Gong created the six arts, Confucius reiterated and arranged them, and Xunzi interpreted them. All three followed the same criteria."<sup>41</sup> The late Qing scholar Yu Yue 俞樾 [1821–1907] wrote,

39 Ibid., 101.

40 Ling Tingkan 凌廷堪, *Jiaoli tang wenji* 校禮堂文集 [*The Collected Works from Jiaoli Studio*], annot. Wang Wenjin 王文錦 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998).

41 Wang Xianqian, *Xunzi jijie*, 14–15.

After *Xunzi* was elevated to the status of orthodox scripture and placed on the level of *The Analects*, along with the works of Mencius, official postings were created for scholars to study the works of Confucius and Mencius full time. During the provincial examination and metropolitan examination portions of the imperial examinations, Confucius is referred to as the “one sage” [*yi sheng* 一聖], and Mencius and Xunzi as the “two virtuous people” [*er xian* 二賢]. This system should continue to be used.<sup>42</sup>

Although this system did not ultimately remain in use, Yu Yue’s statement reflects Qing dynasty scholars’ evaluation of Xunzi.

## 5

The analysis above demonstrates how the relationship between Mencius and Xunzi, as viewed by Confucian scholars in different periods, developed over the years. At first, Mencius and Xunzi had relatively equal status, but later scholars started to show a preference for Mencius over Xunzi. However, Xunzi’s doctrine was by no means removed entirely from the study of Confucianism. Instead, Xunzi’s doctrine exerted its influence in a less explicit form and then experienced a revival, to some degree, during the Qing dynasty. Both Mencius and Xunzi are integral to the history and philosophy of Confucianism, and both are considered to have inherited the thought of Confucius himself. Mencius focused largely on benevolence, highlighting the role of man as a moral entity and moral idealism, which came to be known as the Way of Confucius and Mencius. Xunzi, by contrast, focused largely on Confucius’ philosophy of ritual and the gathering of these rituals into a system, which can be called the Confucius–Xunzi system. The Way of Confucius and Menzi and the Confucius–Xunzi system are interlinked and complementary parts of an overall philosophy of Confucianism, and an understanding of one often depends on an understanding of the other.

As Mencius said in his treatise on taxation,

The Xia dynasty allocated 50 *mu* of arable land to cultivators of land, and, as tax, the cultivators offered tribute in the form of their local products. The Shang dynasty allocated 70 *mu* of arable land to cultivators, and the

42 Yu Yue 俞樾, “Binmeng ji 寶萌集 [Bin Meng Collection],” in *Qingdai shiwen ji huibian 清代詩文集彙編 [Collection of Poems and Prose of the Qing Dynasty]*, ed. *Shanghai guji chubanshe* 上海古籍出版社 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), 685.231.

cultivators paid taxes by cultivating public land collectively. The Zhou dynasty allocated 100 *mu*, and cultivators paid taxes in the form of rent in kind.<sup>43</sup>

Mencius argued that tribute [*gong* 貢], assistance [*zhu* 助], and levy [*che* 徹] are the same category of tax laws. They evolved organically over history. A rational analysis demonstrates that the assistance method is better than the tribute method. Of course, this analysis is not based on conscience but, rather, more closely resembles Xunzi's method of categorizing ideas. As another example, Mencius said he was skilled in the "art of discourse" [*zhi yan* 知言], and he claimed to be able to "find the lie in incomplete thoughts, to find where exaggerated words don't hold up, and to understand what principle is violated by unscrupulous words."<sup>44</sup> But Mencius did not explain how he did so; he did not articulate any methods, and so it is impossible for others to master this skill by studying his methods. This is related to Mencius' emphasis on instincts and intuitive abilities; he ignores experience and cognition to a certain extent.

Xunzi, on the contrary, had a systematic theory of the rectification of names and methods for analyzing concepts and propositions, and, so, Mencius' doctrine on language cannot be fully understood if it is not viewed in the context of Xunzi. In the same way, Xunzi's emphasis on rituals contributed to the development of the Confucian philosophy on ritual. He realized that rituals originate in the conflict between desire and self-interest and that the resolution of this tension is difficult but valuable. However, Xunzi's discussion of the origin of rituals is vague and is attributed simply to the artifice of the sages, an argument that was criticized by later generations. Indeed, a sage is able to form rituals not only because of his "deep deliberation and familiarity with human nature"<sup>45</sup> but also because of his ability to "help others achieve the character and the success that they wish to achieve"<sup>46</sup> and uphold the principles of loyalty and forgiveness. Xunzi's argument in this regard is weak.

Mencius, however, argued that human nature is innately good but only that of sages. He still believes that monarchs and the common people have natural desires and seek a way for these desires to coexist with the innate goodness of human nature. For example, King Xuan of Qi was considered greedy and

43 Zhao Qi and Sun Shi, *Mengzi zhushu*, 160.

44 *Ibid.*, 92.

45 Wang Xianqian, *Xunzi jijie*, 437.

46 He Yan 何晏, annot., and Xing Bing 邢昺, collat., *Lunyu zhushu* 論語注疏 [Annotations on Analects] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), 91.

lustful, but Mencius convinced him to share with the people.<sup>47</sup> Still, Mencius lacked a systematic theory of ritual.

Although Xunzi was deeply concerned about rituals, his writings contain some ambiguities on the question of how rituals come about. Xunzi and the neo-Confucians overemphasized the need for social hierarchy and paid too little heed to the importance of loyalty and forgiveness, values that are needed to put into practice Confucius' ideal that "benevolence is the basis of ritual."<sup>48</sup> Benevolence can be realized only through rituals, and rituals must embody the value of benevolence.

From a historical perspective, changes in the relative stature of Mencius and Xunzi were closely linked to the development of the Confucian orthodoxy. Therefore, an understanding of the Confucian orthodoxy is key to understanding the relationship between Mencius and Xunzi. What is the Confucian orthodoxy? Han Yu believed, validly, that it had benevolence and justice at its core. But he understood benevolence as loving other people and righteousness as behaving correctly based upon one's circumstances. In practice, righteousness can lead to benevolence, and benevolence can also lead to righteousness. One can cultivate inner benevolence and freely carry out righteous actions<sup>49</sup>—this is the origin of Han's concept of benevolence and righteousness. Alternatively, benevolence can be realized through the creation of a fair and just system. This is Xunzi's concept of "using a fair system to propagate benevolence."<sup>50</sup> Confucian thought contains the basis for both doctrines. It is only through the combination of the two that one can understand the complete Confucian view of benevolence and justice. The Confucian tradition, reexamined through the lens of this more complete idea of benevolence and justice, then, is the true Confucian orthodoxy, in which Mencius and Xunzi both have their natural place. The question of how to unify the two doctrines and develop a new system of Confucianism is a key issue in modern Confucian research.

*Translated by Colleen Howe*

47 Zhao Qi and Sun Shi, *Mengzi zhushu*, 56.

48 He Yan and Xing Bing, *Lunyu zhushu*, 32.

49 Zhao Qi and Sun Shi, *Mengzi zhushu*, 235.

50 Wang Xianqian, *Xunzi jijie*, 492.

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