

荀子

Xunzi

THE
COMPLETE
TEXT

TRANSLATED AND WITH
AN INTRODUCTION BY

Eric L. Hutton

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When the disciple has achieved success and profit, then he gratefully thinks of his teacher.

—*Xunzi*, chap. 14

This book is dedicated to P. J. Ivanhoe, my mentor and friend.

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INTRODUCTION

Without a doubt, the *Xunzi* is one of the most philosophically interesting and sophisticated texts in the Confucian tradition. It covers a wide variety of topics—education, ritual, music, language, psychology, history, religion, ethics, politics, and warfare, to name just a few—and it provides quite thoughtful treatments of all these subjects. Indeed, despite being a very old text, many of its insights still ring true in the present. It is thus a text that amply rewards study, and not only for those seeking to understand ancient Chinese views in particular, but also for anyone reflecting on these important aspects of human life in general.

THE PURPOSE AND FEATURES OF THIS TRANSLATION

Although the *Xunzi* is a very rich text, study of the *Xunzi* was relatively neglected for many centuries in China, due in large part to the greater popularity of another early Confucian text with rival ideas, the *Mencius* (also called the *Mengzi*). As a result, the *Xunzi* was initially also rather neglected by many Western students of Chinese thought. Fortunately, this situation is slowly being rectified, and study of the *Xunzi* has begun to flourish again both inside and outside China in recent years. Nevertheless, the evidence of long neglect is still apparent in various ways, one of which is that there was no complete English translation of the *Xunzi* available before the work of John Knoblock appeared during the years 1988–94. Since one of the most important means for promoting the study of Chinese thought in the West is by making primary sources available to readers through translations, this was a major step forward for the field.

Yet, while Knoblock has undeniably made a great contribution to study of the *Xunzi*, in various ways his translation is not well suited for use in teaching undergraduates. For one thing, he provides a tremendous amount of explanatory material and endnotes that far exceed the needs of the typical undergraduate reader, which makes his translation a massive work and contributed to its being unfortunately priced well beyond what is reasonable for textbook adoptions. (Moreover, at the time of writing this, the original version has gone out of print. A bilingual reprint from mainland China is currently available for purchase, but is still quite expensive and omits all of Knoblock's explanatory material and endnotes, thereby leaving students with no aids whatsoever for understanding the more difficult parts of the text.) Also, in striving to be precise and literal, Knoblock produced prose that is frequently difficult to follow for undergraduate readers. More seriously, there are some substantial inaccuracies and technical flaws in the translation that have been pointed out in published reviews of it, which I will not rehearse here.

As an alternative to using Knoblock's translation for teaching undergraduates, there exists a widely available, older translation of the *Xunzi* by Burton Watson, which is often more readable and more accurate and has been priced more affordably than Knoblock's work. It is thus better suited to serve the needs of the undergraduate classroom, and hence has

continued to be the preferred edition for many instructors, even after the appearance of Knoblock's translation. Yet, because Watson's translation is abridged, it omits many chapters that are both historically and philosophically very significant, and which can markedly impact one's interpretation of the text. Instructors teaching from Watson's text but wishing to cover parts of the *Xunzi* not included in it have therefore been faced with the choice of supplementing Watson's work either by undertaking the time-consuming task of translating the other parts themselves—if they have the requisite linguistic competence in Chinese at all—or by borrowing sections from Knoblock or other partial translations, a practice that is likewise not ideal, since different translators adopt different conventions in rendering various terms, concepts, and so on, which can make it difficult to combine them in an unproblematic and straightforward manner.

The present translation is intended to fill a gap that has thus been left by the work of Knoblock and Watson, as well as other partial English translations, by providing a new and complete English translation of the *Xunzi* that will be well suited for use in teaching Chinese to undergraduates. While the translation is thus not designed primarily for the edification of graduate students or specialists in Chinese thought, the work as a whole and certain features of it in particular may perhaps still prove useful for their research. If so, I would find that gratifying. Nonetheless, more advanced readers should bear in mind that the translation aims primarily to serve a different audience, and hence there are features that they might find desirable, but that I have purposely omitted, because of my rather strong concerns about the needs of undergraduate readers and their needs, based on my own experience in teaching, that have driven many choices I have made in the course of producing the work.

First, as with any translation, I have been very concerned with accuracy, but because my target is the undergraduate classroom, I have also made certain compromises. The Chinese text of the *Xunzi* was written with great erudition, which I have tried to reflect in the translation. However, to make the text accessible to undergraduates, I also have tried very hard to make it easy to read, that is, to have it sound learned to a modern ear without being stodgy. In some cases this has required adopting renderings that are not very literal translations of the Chinese, including, for instance, simplifying some of the long lists of nearly synonymous terms that one often finds in the *Xunzi*, which make for extremely cumbersome English if each and every item is translated. Likewise, on a number of occasions the *Xunzi* gives names of minerals, plants, and (sometimes mythical) animals for which—the named item can be reliably identified at all—there is no common equivalent in English or for which the common equivalent is unfamiliar or meaningless to most urban-dwelling college students. For many such cases, I have opted simply to give the name used by the *Xunzi* in romanization, rather than trying to supply an exact English equivalent. In these and other instances, I have taken such steps only when it seems that no especially significant philosophical point will be sacrificed by the use of transliterations or less literal translations.

Second, since most undergraduate students are likely to encounter the *Xunzi* as part of a larger course on Chinese thought, I have tried to make the translation friendly to such use in certain ways. For one thing, students in these courses are often required to read several works, each of which has been done by a different translator. If, as mentioned earlier, the various translators each render key terms very differently, it then becomes difficult for students to grasp and keep sight of the fact that these different texts are all employing an

debating a shared set of Chinese terms. This problem arises from the fact that there is not an overwhelming scholarly consensus about how to translate a number of Chinese words. Nevertheless, among many English translators there is a tradition of rendering certain Chinese terms with particular English words, and for the sake of cross-compatibility with existing translations, I have largely followed this tradition, even when there might be reasons for adopting different translations if the terms were to be considered in complete isolation from both other texts and other terms in this text (e.g., I follow convention in rendering *zhuhou* 諸侯 as “feudal lords,” even though the ancient Chinese political system may have been “feudal” in only a very tenuous sense at best). Readers should therefore keep in mind that the English words used as translations here are intended as stand-ins and approximations for Chinese terms, whose actual meanings must always be grasped through observing their use in context—the English terms are *not* to be taken as precise equivalents for the Chinese words.

For a very small number of important philosophical terms, however, such as *ren* 仁 and *yi* 義, for which any choice of translation is especially contentious, and whose varying usages in the text make it quite difficult to adopt any rendering in a completely consistent manner, I have opted to leave them untranslated and instead simply written them in romanization. Since this book is intended for the classroom, I am anticipating that students reading the *Xunzi* as part of a course will be introduced to these terms in some fashion (or via some translation) by their instructor. The choice to leave these words untranslated is intended to allow readers to track with great clarity exactly where the terms appear and how they are deployed, and thereby to assess for themselves how best to understand what the words mean in the context of the *Xunzi*. For readers without the aids of an instructor and classroom, however, who have no prior exposure to Chinese thought, I have provided explanations of these terms in the footnotes and in [appendix 1](#) that should give them a basic understanding of these concepts, and I have also provided a very brief overview of important ideas in the text in the third section of this introduction.

A third way in which this translation is tailored for undergraduate students is that I have limited notes on technical matters to an absolute minimum, since such notes are relevant mostly to readers with advanced skills in classical Chinese, which few undergraduate students possess at this time. The technical notes are indicated with superscript letters and can be found at the end of the book. I have generally indicated only those instances where my reading differs from that found in the major premodern commentaries on the text. So, for example, when I have followed emendations or variant readings suggested by the major premodern commentaries (especially those cited in Wang Xianqian’s *Xunzi Jijie* 荀子集解, which is my base text), I usually have not noted this. In those cases, scholars looking for justifications for particular renderings are encouraged to consult Wang’s book and the other works I have used in preparing this translation, which are listed in the bibliography. Overall, I have taken a fairly conservative stance toward the text, and have generally adopted emendations only when it seems to me necessary in order to make sense of it.

Compared with explanations of technical matters, I have provided many more notes on matters of historical background and other supplementary information, but in this case also I have tried to limit the explanations to what is most essential for understanding the *Xunzi* and to what I think will be most useful for undergraduate students. With regard to the format

kind of explanation, important names and terms are generally explained in the notes where they first appear in the text, and the index lists in bold type the pages where the introductory accounts are given, for easy reference afterward. Readers requiring more detailed information about people and events mentioned by the *Xunzi* are encouraged to consult Knoblock's work, which contains copious explanations and references. With regard to the latter kind of material, since the translation may be used as a part of a general course on Chinese thought, I have indicated in the notes a number of places where comparisons with other early Chinese texts are illuminating, with the hope that these citations will encourage students to undertake such comparisons on their own.

Two further features of the translation deserve mention here. The first is the numbering system I have deployed. Unlike a number of other early Chinese texts such as the *Analec* and the *Mencius*, and the *Daodejing*, for which there exist standard numbering systems that facilitate ease and precision of references, there is no standard numbering system for the text of the *Xunzi*. There are two concordances that many scholars use as the basis for their references, but since these texts are in Chinese only, they are not accessible to those who cannot read the language. Knoblock numbered the paragraphs of his translation, but the way that his numbering is done can sometimes misleadingly suggest discontinuities in the text's discussions. Moreover, the matter of how to divide the text into paragraphs is itself uncertain and occasionally quite controversial. (My own paragraph divisions mostly follow those of other editions, but in some cases depart from common practice, sometimes for the convenience of English readers.) As an alternative way to facilitate scholarly references, I have provided line numbers for my translation. I have also provided an appendix to assist students who may be trying to track down references in secondary literature on the *Xunzi* based on the Chinese concordances, or who wish to compare this translation with others. In the notes and appendixes, references to my translation are given in the form "chapter number.line number" to enable readers to locate the indicated passages quickly and precisely.

The other feature of this translation that warrants comment is the handling of rhymed lines. The *Xunzi* contains numerous rhymed passages. A number of these are quotations from the *Odes*, which is an ancient collection of poems—or more accurately, songs—that the *Xunzi* treats as a repository of wisdom, and which it cites to illustrate and support its claims. Many other rhymed passages appear to be original to the *Xunzi*. (I say "appear" because it is always possible that in particular cases the text is quoting, without attribution, from some source now lost to us, but it is doubtful that all of the unattributed passages come from some other source.) Some of these other rhyming passages are probably modeled after the *Odes*, and some or even all of the rhymed passages may likewise have been intended to be sung aloud, perhaps with the purpose of making the lessons they teach more memorable. However, the rhymes that are not quoted from the *Odes* have not always been noted in previous translations of the *Xunzi*. Both Watson and Knoblock often overlook them, as do many translations of the *Xunzi* into modern Chinese and Japanese and Korean.

The function of these rhymed sections and their significance for understanding the *Xunzi* are substantial issues that merit lengthy discussion more appropriate for an article or book than this introduction, but I consider the presence of these rhymes a feature of the text that is sufficiently noteworthy to deserve being reflected conspicuously in the translation. Since the rhyming sections can easily be overlooked (especially by students) if they are indicated

merely in footnotes or with offsetting, I have chosen to make them conspicuous by translating rhymed passages in Chinese with rhymed sections of English, *except* when I felt beyond my ability or when the constraints imposed by translating in rhyme would necessitate obscuring or misrepresenting something I thought to be of special significance. In such cases, I have left the English text unrhymed and instead resorted to indicating the rhymes in the notes and/or with offset lines.¹ For the rhymes in English, I have tried to follow the original rhyme pattern used in the Chinese where possible, but where that made the task of rhyming the English too difficult, I have not followed the Chinese rhymes, on the grounds that I think it more important to convey to students *that* the text is rhymed than exactly *how* it is rhymed, as the latter issue is mostly of interest to specialists. For the same reason, I have not noted the original Chinese words that rhyme. The identification of the rhymes in the Chinese text requires detailed knowledge of ancient phonology that I lack, and so I have relied on published studies of rhymes in the *Xunzi* by other scholars. Since their analyses may have missed some of the rhyming passages, and since there is ongoing scholarly debate about how to reconstruct the sounds of ancient Chinese in the first place, I do not claim to have identified every instance of rhyme in the text, but I do hope to have surpassed previous translations in highlighting this feature of the *Xunzi*.

The rhymed sections of the *Xunzi*, both the quotations from the *Odes* and the unattributed rhymes, generally display an additional feature, namely fixed line lengths. That is to say, usually the lines are all composed of the same number of Chinese characters, or alternate the number of characters according to some pattern, which would normally translate to a fixed number of syllables per line if spoken. Awareness of this aspect is important for appreciating the artistry involved in the composition of ancient Chinese verse, for it thus required meeting two distinct challenges, namely getting the lines to rhyme and doing so within the constraint of fixed line lengths. In order to represent the latter feature of the Chinese text, when translating the rhymed passages with English rhymes, in most cases I have adopted lines with fixed numbers of syllables. Since many English words are polysyllabic, however, it is not possible to match the number of syllables in the Chinese lines exactly, so case by case I have picked a limit for the syllables in the English lines, based on what seemed to be the minimum for rendering the Chinese into English with reasonable accuracy.

Through translating the rhymed sections in a fashion that simulates the constraints faced by the original composers, I hope to have approximated—not equaled—the artistry that appears in the Chinese text of the *Xunzi*. Although the great scholar of Chinese thought D. C. Lau once claimed that the *Xunzi* displays “an indifferent literary style,”² I respectfully disagree with his assessment. Even if the *Xunzi* does not display the imaginative fancy of some early texts, such as the *Zhuangzi*, the style of writing in the *Xunzi* is extremely powerful and elegant. While I cannot match this power and elegance in English, I hope that what I have done can in some small measure convey to the English reader a bit of the beauty of the *Xunzi*’s Chinese text and its mastery of multiple forms of presentation, and that this effect can compensate for the occasional, slight departures from literal accuracy involved in producing the rhymed translations.

Last, it is by now a well-worn cliché that “every translation is an act of interpretation.” Like any other scholar, I have my own particular views about how best to interpret the text, but in general, I have tried not to inject too many of my own particular readings into the

translation, especially where these would be highly idiosyncratic. Readers who compare this work with other translations and commentaries will find that, by and large, I am in agreement with traditional interpretations of the text. Nonetheless, part of my aim has also been to present a reading of the *Xunzi* that is philosophically coherent, and so in some cases this has meant departing from the consensus view when it has seemed to me that the traditional readings have not done full justice to the content of the text. In most cases, I have discussed these departures in the textual notes or footnotes. Along the way, I have also tried to improve on the efforts of previous translators such as Knoblock and Watson, by consulting published criticisms of their work and taking care to avoid problems pointed out by the critics, when I could agree that their criticisms were justified. I have tried to have good reasons for all the decisions I have made in the course of translating the *Xunzi*, but since the present work is intended to offer primarily a translation and not a full-scale commentary on the text, I have not attempted to explain all those decisions in this book. No doubt, some readers will question or disagree with the choices I have made, and likely some will rightly identify places where I myself could and should have done better. Even so, if this translation serves to instill in students an appreciation of the *Xunzi* and a desire to study it further, its purpose will be fulfilled.

XUNZI: TEXT AND PERSON

The received text of the *Xunzi* is divided into thirty-two sections, which I refer to as “chapters.” These chapters (or parts of them) likely circulated as freestanding pieces in ancient China, and probably were never intended to be read in a particular order in the form of a single book, as we now have it. Rather, our received text was first compiled by Liu Xiang (77–6 BCE), who states in his preface that he started with 322 sections of text, which he reduced to our current text of thirty-two chapters, after eliminating “duplicates” and performing other editing.³ The sources from which Liu worked are now lost to us, and while future archaeological work may recover pieces of the text that predate Liu’s work, we are not at present in a position to know for sure what might have been lost, added, or changed in the process of his editing.

This history of the text has certain implications for how to approach it.⁴ For one thing, attempting to understand its philosophical content, little significance can be attached to the order of the chapters, since Liu Xiang was apparently the first to combine them in a sequence which necessitated giving them some order. Indeed, over the centuries, editors of the *Xunzi* have felt free to rearrange the chapters on various grounds, and so the arrangements tell us more about the editors’ views than about the meaning of the chapters in their original context. The arrangement in this translation follows that of the Tang dynasty edition (813 CE) of Yang Liang, which is the basis for most copies of the *Xunzi* in print today. A point similar to the first one also applies to the organization of content *within* the chapters. In particular, some chapters offer rather choppy discussions of a single theme or seem to combine discussions of unrelated topics, but these features of the text may simply be artifacts of Liu’s editing, rather than reflecting how the content was originally supposed to be read. Hence, such organization (or as it may be, disorganization) can bear little weight

interpreting the philosophical content or assessing the authenticity of the chapters. The same must be said about the titles of the chapters as well. Some works in ancient China circulated without titles, and there are no records prior to Liu Xiang's edition of the *Xunzi* of any of the chapter titles of the *Xunzi* listed by Liu, so he may well have added them himself.

Our title for the whole collection of chapters, the *Xunzi*—which also is most likely an addition by editors—comes from the name of the person, Xunzi, whose thought it purports to record.⁵ In turn, the name “Xunzi” (literally, “Master Xun”) is an honorific title for the master Xun Kuang 荀况. As is the case for so many other early Chinese thinkers, little is known for sure about his life. There is no firm evidence for his dates of birth and death, and hence scholars have made varying proposals on the matter. To give just a small sample illustrating the diversity of opinions, Qian Mu 錢穆 estimates Xunzi's dates as 340 to 245 BCE, the authors of the Beijing University Philosophy Department commentary as ca. 325 to ca. 230 BCE, You Guo'en 游國恩 as 314 to 217 BCE, and John Knoblock as ca. 315 to ca. 215 BCE. While there is thus disagreement about the exact span of his life, there is a fairly strong consensus that Xunzi was active in the latter half of the Warring States period (403–221 BCE). At that time, the power of the nominal ruling dynasty, the Zhou dynasty, was in steep decline, and what was then Chinese territory was divided into several states that were engaged in a violent struggle among themselves for overall supremacy. As can be seen from some of the above estimates of Xunzi's life that favor later dates, he may have lived long enough to see the momentous end of this period, when the state of Qin finished off the last of its rivals to become the sole ruling power in 221 BCE. Indeed, according to early accounts, two of Xunzi's students, Han Feizi and Li Si, were important agents in Qin's rise to dominance, but given Qin's brutal government practices, this association wound up bringing disrepute to Xunzi's name in later history. Judging by the content of the *Xunzi*, however, Xunzi himself apparently would not have approved of Li Si's and Han Feizi's methods.

During his lifetime, as with most other intellectuals of his day, Xunzi moved from state to state, seeking to persuade a ruler to employ him and put his teachings into practice. Over the years, he managed to become a fairly prominent figure. In the state of Qi, for example, he was thrice given the high honor of being the ritual “libationer” for the group of distinguished people the king had assembled at Jixia. Xunzi also succeeded in obtaining political office. He was magistrate of Lanling in the state of Chu twice, and in the interim between those positions, he was given the title of “Minister” (*qing* 卿) in the state of Zhao, which is why he is also known as Xun Qing.⁷ However, during his time in office, he was unable to bring about the grand reforms envisioned in the writings attributed to him, perhaps in part because of political intrigues against him and his rulers. In 238 BCE, his lord in Chu was assassinated and Xunzi lost his post for the last time. Early sources report that he then lived out the rest of his life in retirement from office in Lanling, writing and teaching. His tradition of scholarship was very influential for a long period after his life, especially in the early years of the Han dynasty that followed the short reign of Qin. Much later, the Tang dynasty thinker Han Yan (768–824 CE) famously criticized Xunzi's thought as having “impurities,” and this appraisal became very influential during the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE) and thereafter. The *Mencius* came to be preferred by many Confucian thinkers, while Xunzi came to be regarded as a “heterodox” Confucian. This view persists in some quarters even today, though, as noted earlier, a greater appreciation for the *Xunzi* is now growing.

The relation between the person Xunzi and the text *Xunzi* is a complicated issue. To start with a general point, archaeological finds and historical research have led many scholars not to believe that a number of ancient Chinese texts that tradition attributes to a single author, such as the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, are in fact composite texts, written by different authors, whose work perhaps spans a long period of time. To that extent, the respective traditional ascriptions of these texts to single figures such as Laozi and Zhuangzi are incorrect. Laozi and Zhuangzi may never even have existed as persons, or if they did, they may not have thought, said, or written any of the things attributed to them. For this reason, some scholars want to avoid any reference to Laozi and Zhuangzi at all, preferring to speak only of “what the *Daodejing* says” or “what the *Zhuangzi* says,” and so forth.

When it comes to the *Xunzi*, there are indications in the text that not all of it was written by a single person, and hence that not all of it was written by Xunzi himself. For example, some chapters contain dialogues in which Xunzi appears as an interlocutor, but in which he is called Xun Qingzi (“Master Xun Qing”) or other titles that it would be extremely unlikely for a Chinese writer to employ in referring to himself. At minimum, such instances seem to be evidence of editing by someone other than Xunzi, and many scholars consider it likely that these sections were originally written by his disciples, who were recording (or maybe inventing) the words of their teacher. Also, the last six chapters in the present arrangement of the text display both a piecemeal quality and a use of didactic vignettes, differing significantly from the essays that constitute the bulk of the first twenty-four chapters. For this reason, many have likewise suspected the material of the last six chapters of being a compilation made by Xunzi’s students, rather than the writings of Xunzi himself. A further relevant point is that a number of passages in the *Xunzi* that are not explicitly attributed to any other source appear verbatim or nearly verbatim—and without any mention of Xunzi or the *Xunzi*—in early texts such as the *Hanshi Waizhuan* 韓詩外傳, *Liji* 禮記, *Kongzi Jiayu* 孔子家語, and so on. The existence of these parallel passages raises difficult questions about whether these texts are incorporating sections from the *Xunzi* or the *Xunzi* is incorporating sections from them, or whether all of them are incorporating sections from some earlier, now lost source.⁸ To the extent that either of the latter two scenarios is the case, the *Xunzi* would contain many more elements that Xunzi did not write.

Given these indications that various sections of the *Xunzi* were not all written by a single person, one might then wonder how much of it really was written by Xunzi after all. Since we have little information about Xunzi’s life, and since most of the information we do have comes from sources whose veracity and accuracy are not fully reliable, it is impossible to say for sure that the historical Xunzi is responsible for any of the text that now bears his name. Nevertheless, few scholars seem inclined to doubt the existence of Xunzi as a real person, and few seem inclined to take the position that the *Xunzi* does not at all reflect the views of the historical Xunzi. Between the position that Xunzi is responsible for all of our text and the position that he is responsible for none of it, there is a wide range of possibilities, over which scholars have argued at length. Their positions and arguments are so varied and numerous that I will not rehearse them here. Instead, I simply note that most scholars seem to agree that [chapters 1 to 26](#) in the present arrangement are more likely to contain material that comes directly from Xunzi, though this still leaves much room for disagreement. Ultimately, most scholars could probably agree that from a strict historical perspective, it is safest

speak of “what the *Xunzi* says,” while claims about “what Xunzi says” or “what Xunzi thinks” must be regarded as somewhat tentative.

However, the historical perspective is not the only perspective through which one can read and discuss the text, and from a philosophical perspective in particular, these worries about the composition of the text are less pressing. If we are interested in the ideas in the text, their coherence among them, and whether there are any lessons we can learn from it for ourselves about how we should think and live nowadays, then it matters little whether Xunzi himself is actually responsible for the content of the *Xunzi*. Likewise, from such a perspective, it matters little whether the text was written by a single person or by many people over time. For neither does it follow from the mere fact that a single person writes a text that it will be consistent or insightful, nor does it follow from the mere fact that a text is written by a multitude of people that it will be inconsistent or unenlightening. Hence, for example, even if [chapters 27](#) to [32](#) of the *Xunzi* were produced by a wholly different set of persons than the author(s) of the rest of the work, that fact does not by itself entail that these last six chapters do not “belong” with the rest of the *Xunzi* in the sense of forming a coherent whole—that is, a matter that can be assessed only by examining the content of those chapters. Some scholars have suggested that the material of [chapters 27](#) to [32](#), though not composed by Xunzi, was used by him in teaching his students, who then recorded, collected, and preserved it after his death. If such were the case, then we might actually *expect* a fairly good fit between the ideas of those chapters and the rest (and in my view that is what we find when we examine them). We cannot be sure whether the chapters really came about in this way, but the important point is that historical facts about the origins of the text will not suffice to answer every question one might be interested in asking about it.

Furthermore, from a philosophical perspective, when one is trying to assess what one might learn from a text, one wants to know not just what it says, but moreover *how* to think with it. That is to say, one wants to know what it is like to think from the point of view of someone who holds the beliefs propounded by the text (insofar as a coherent point of view can be distilled from it), in order to see how well such a way of thinking can answer questions, respond to challenges, and so on. If the text is said to be written by a certain named individual, then for the sake of discussion it will be quite natural to label this point of view with the person’s name, and thus to speak of it in terms of the person’s claims and thoughts. Such a manner of speaking is philosophical, not historical,⁹ for the primary referent of such discussion is the point of view, rather than the actual person, who may or may not in fact have had that point of view, and may or may not even have existed. If the text turns out to be a composite work—or even if it is known to be such from the outset—then it is perhaps somewhat less likely (though not impossible) that this point of view was ever in fact held by any particular individual. Yet, even this fact about the text would not entail that one cannot hypothesize an individual with such a point of view for the purposes of philosophical inquiry, nor would it preclude giving this hypothetical individual and point of view a name for the sake of discussion, including, as before, the name(s) of the text’s supposed author(s).

In such a philosophical manner, then, one can speak of “what Xunzi says” and “what Xunzi thinks,” based on what appears in the text, while leaving open the question of the extent to which this “Xunzi” and his views correspond to those of the actual person Xunzi and/or other people responsible for the content of the *Xunzi*. (A similar approach can likewise be taken

with Laozi and Zhuangzi and other Warring States figures.) I do not mean to claim that this approach is to be preferred over all others, but since I approach the text primarily from a philosophical perspective, this is how I will be speaking when I talk of Xunzi and his view from here on.¹⁰

XUNZI'S THOUGHT: ITS BACKGROUND AND SALIENT FEATURES

During the Warring States period, alongside the rivalry among political powers, there was also a lively competition among ideas. One of these competitors was the emerging tradition that we now call “Confucianism,” which as an English label suggests that the tradition originates with Confucius. However, the thinkers in this tradition—including Confucius himself, at least as he is depicted in our primary source for knowledge about him, the *Analects*—viewed themselves as belonging to an older tradition of thought and practice that they believed stretched far back in time to long before their own day. They credited the origins of this tradition to a series of sages (*sheng ren* 聖人) and sage kings (*sheng wang* 聖王) such as the founding rulers of the Zhou dynasty, namely King Wen, King Wu, and the Duke of Zhou, and even earlier kings such as Yao, Shun, Yu, and Tang.¹¹ As part of the belief that they were upholding this ancient tradition, these Warring States thinkers tended to identify themselves using the label *ru* 儒, which originally meant simply a “cultivated person” or “learned person,” but over centuries of association with these thinkers and their later followers came to be the name for their whole group, which we now translate as “Confucians.”¹²

A very concise summary of their ideas might be given as follows. These *ru* thinkers believed that what the ancient sages and sage kings practiced and taught—and hence what they themselves likewise practiced and taught—was the Way (*dao* 道), that is, the proper way to live and to organize society. They believed that knowledge of the Way was preserved in certain “classic” texts, which they accordingly treated as revered objects of study. In turn, to live according to this Way required practicing certain rituals (*li* 禮) and exercising certain virtues. The most important of these virtues are *ren* 仁, which includes caring for others as a central element, and *yi* 義, which involves a devotion to what is right.¹³ On their view, embodying the Way to the highest degree, one becomes a gentleman (*junzi* 君子) or even a sage. Furthermore, they believed that such cultivated people possess a kind of moral charisma (*de* 德, translated in this volume as “virtue”)¹⁴ that makes others friendly and supportive to them. The combination of these factors, the *ru* thought, explained why the ancient sage kings were able to be great leaders who brought peace and prosperity to the whole world, and hence these thinkers hoped to put an end to the chaos and suffering of the Warring States era by practicing moral cultivation and by getting others, especially rulers, to cultivate themselves.

At the same time this *ru* tradition was taking form, however, it was also challenged on many fronts. Rival thinkers claimed that the *ru* had the wrong understanding of the Way, and hence that their approach to individual moral behavior as well as their views of government were mistaken or, even worse, positively harmful to individuals and society. To give just

few examples, Laozi and Zhuangzi rejected the *ru* ideals as being, in a sense, a highly artificial way of life for human beings.¹⁵ Against this, they proposed what they considered to be a more natural form of life. On the other hand, Mozi and his followers (the Mohists) criticized many of the rituals prized by the *ru* as a mere waste of resources and time; they advocated a fairly austere form of life and government instead. Yet others questioned the *ru* insistence that political power must be wedded to moral excellence in the form of having a sage king on the throne. In early China, certain rulers had been militarily and politically quite successful without conforming to the moral ideals of the *ru*, and these rulers, called *ba* 霸 (“hegemon”) presented an alternative model for governing that apparently some found less demanding and more practicable, and hence more attractive.¹⁶

In relation to this background, Xunzi firmly believes in the main elements of the *ru* position as described above, and many of his discussions are aimed at elucidating and defending it against challenges such as the ones just mentioned, while also criticizing his rivals’ views. For Xunzi, however, there is an additional worry. Although he regards Confucius as a sage and the true inheritor of the Way as taught by the sages of yore, there are others who came after Confucius and who claimed to be *ru*, but whom Xunzi considers to be misrepresenting the authentic teachings and practices of the ancient sages and of Confucius. Xunzi therefore tries to combat these views as well, and does not shy away from singling out fellow *ru* thinkers by name for criticism.

Perhaps the most famous—or one might say, infamous—case of the latter sort of criticism is that which appears in [chapter 23](#). There Xunzi argues that human nature is bad and explicitly attacks the claim of Mencius that human nature is good (a criticism that led later *ru* to belittle the *Xunzi* when the *Mencius* gained in popularity, as mentioned previously). Xunzi thinks not only that there is no good evidence for Mencius’s view, but moreover that it threatens to undermine the *ru* tradition instead of supporting it. If people somehow naturally knew the Way and were naturally inclined to follow it, Xunzi reasons, then there would be little need for them to seek guidance from the ancient sages and their wisdom as handed down in the classic texts; they could simply look within themselves for the answers instead. However, encouraging people to trust in their own individual judgments, if they do not in fact naturally conform to the Way, will likely result in chaos and disaster, and so is a very dangerous idea from Xunzi’s perspective.

By the same token, even though Mencius is his explicit target, Xunzi’s contention that human nature is bad also serves as a response to Laozi and Zhuangzi. For it amounts to the claim that, contrary to what they propose, living in a more “natural” manner would not be better for people, but would in fact make them worse off. In sharp contrast to these other figures, Xunzi exalts *wei* 偽. The word *wei* originally connotes what is “artificial” in a negative sense, but in Xunzi’s hands it becomes a technical term (rendered here as “deliberate effort”) for ways of behaving that do not arise from human nature and may even be contrary to it, and that thus provide a way to avoid the misdeeds and troubles to which human nature would otherwise lead us. Xunzi’s rejection of these rival views is also reflected in his choice of analogies. Whereas the *Mencius* frequently compares the proper course of human development to that of the natural growth of plants, and the *Daodejing* analogizes the ideal human state to wood in its unhewn and original condition, Xunzi most frequently illustrates his view of proper human development with examples from crafts, such as the bending of

wood, in which human artifice transforms raw natural materials into things that are useful and beautiful.

As for the questions of exactly what Xunzi means in claiming that human nature is bad, whether this claim is really opposed to the claim that human nature is good in the sense that the *Mencius* depicts Mencius as believing it, and whether either claim is correct—these are issues about which there has been tremendous scholarly debate stretching over centuries. This introduction is not the place to try to settle any of those matters.¹⁷ One point is very clear though, which is that although Xunzi thinks that human nature is bad, he also believes that through deliberate effort, people have the potential to overcome their natures and become good—indeed, to become sages. Accordingly, one of the most commonly repeated themes of his remarks is to urge people to become as good as possible, both for their own sakes, and for the sake of peace and order in the world at large.

In this process of becoming good, ritual plays an especially important role in Xunzi's view. As he conceives them, the rituals constitute a set of standards for proper behavior that were created by the past sages and should govern virtually every aspect of a person's life.¹⁸ These rituals are not inviolable rules: Xunzi allows that people with developed moral judgment may need to depart from the strict dictates of ritual on some occasions, but he thinks those just beginning the process of moral learning need to submit completely to the requirements of ritual. Of the many important roles played by the rituals in making people good on Xunzi's view, three particularly deserve mention here. First, the rituals serve to *display* certain attitudes and emotions. The ritually prescribed actions in the case of mourning, for instance, exhibit grief over the loss of a loved one, whether or not the ritual practitioner actually feels sadness. Second, even if the ritual practitioner does not actually feel the particular attitude or emotion embodied in the ritual, Xunzi believes that repeated performance of the ritual can, when done properly, serve to *cultivate* those attitudes and emotions in the person. To use a modern example, toddlers who do not know to be grateful when given a gift may be taught to say "thank you" and may do so without any understanding of its meaning or a feeling of gratitude. With repetition, time, and a more mature understanding of the meaning of the phrase, many of these children grow into adults who not only feel gratitude upon receiving gifts but also say "thank you" as a conscious expression of that feeling. Similarly, on Xunzi's view, rituals serve to inculcate attitudes and feelings, such as caring and respect, that are characteristic of virtue, and then serve to express a person's virtue once it is fully developed. A third important function of the rituals is to allot different responsibilities, privileges, and goods to different individuals, and thereby help to prevent conflict over these things among people.

In Xunzi's thought, these features of ritual help both to solve the problem posed by the badness of human nature and to respond to challenges such as those posed by Mozi. Xunzi thinks that certain impulses that are part of human nature cannot be eliminated or wholly suppressed. The rituals provide a way of giving expression to these impulses, and hence they help to satisfy certain human needs, but at the same time they constrain, shape, and channel these impulses to result in behaviors that are peaceful, orderly, and beneficial, whereas the impulses would otherwise lead mostly to strife, chaos, and harm. In this manner, ritual serves as a key part of the cure for the badness of human nature, and the badness of human nature thus helps justify adherence to ritual.¹⁹ At the same time, many aspects of ritual that Mo

criticized turn out on this view not to be wasteful or useless for ordering society, but rather to be quite reasonable and even necessary for that purpose. For as Xunzi sees it, creating a stable, well-functioning society depends upon satisfying but also managing various elements of human psychology in ways that only ritual can do.²⁰

This last point in response to Mozi also forms the basis of Xunzi's answer to those tempted by the figure of the hegemon, whom even Xunzi acknowledges to be a strong and successful ruler. On Xunzi's analysis, the hegemon has these achievements because he manifests a high degree of self-restraint and even virtue, namely trustworthiness (*xin* 信), which enables him to build relationships with his ministers and subjects that result in an effective government and military. Since the hegemon is virtuous to this limited extent, he is better than vicious tyrants who, through greed, arrogance, and folly, bring destruction upon themselves, but the hegemon nevertheless still ranks second behind the fully virtuous sage king in Xunzi's view. The hegemon is inferior, he thinks, because the hegemon is not committed to moral cultivation of himself or those he rules, and without such cultivation, the kind of relationship between ruler and ruled will be neither as strong nor as stable as that which obtains in the case of a sage king. In contrast, the sage king as Xunzi portrays him is someone who not only strives for utmost virtue in himself, but also aims to teach his people and reform their basic natures, and hence both sides will share the same moral standards, and the ruled will admire and love the ruler for embodying those standards to the highest degree. As before, ritual plays a key role in this picture by serving as the means to inculcate these shared moral standards in both the ruler and his people, as well as providing for their expression in action such that the ruler comes to be recognized by his subjects as a moral paragon.

It is noteworthy that in focusing on these social and psychological effects of ritual on both the ritual practitioner and those around him, Xunzi rejects the idea that rituals have any supernatural powers. For instance, Heaven (*tian* 天, lit. "sky") was regarded by many in early China as a deity with awareness, intentions, and a tendency to intervene in the world to reward the virtuous and punish the vicious. In keeping with such a view, some rituals sought to enlist Heaven's aid or avoid its wrath. Xunzi, however, espouses an understanding of Heaven as much more like what we might call "Nature," namely an impersonal force in the world that is responsible for various phenomena and does not react to human virtue or vice or supplication (chap. 17). Hence, human performance of rituals can have no power to affect Heaven, and Xunzi takes a similar view of other rituals that purport to influence other beings, such as ghosts and spirits, about whose existence he seems skeptical. While not believing in the supposed supernatural efficacy of such rituals, neither does Xunzi advocate abandoning them. Rather, in his view they are to remain part of the practice of even cultivated people whom he expects to understand that the rituals lack supernatural efficacy but are still valuable for their psychological and social effects. Thus, though it may sound strange to a modern ear, Xunzi presents ritual practice as involving "a sophisticated form of pretending" (as one scholar nicely puts it)²¹ that is undertaken neither for the sake of deceiving self or others nor for the sake of manipulating supernatural forces, but rather for the ways in which it can structure, beautify, and even elevate human life.

Apart from its relation to his view of ritual, Xunzi's conception of Heaven as described in the previous paragraph is significant for other reasons that also deserve comment here. In particular, the view of Heaven as an impersonal, amoral force does not seem to originate

with Xunzi. Rather, that idea seems to have first been proposed in the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*. There it is used to undermine *ru* thinkers as well as the Mohists, who had both appealed to a more theological conception of Heaven as supporting their moral and political programs; all agreed that humans ought to model themselves after Heaven, but if Heaven is an impersonal, amoral force, then following its model actually leads one away from the *ru* and Mohist ideals. Strikingly, Xunzi adopts nearly the same conception of Heaven as one seen in the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, but then argues that precisely because Heaven is so different from human beings, it should *not* be our model for behavior, and instead there is a unique role for human beings to play in the world with its own distinct set of moral standards. In this manner, Xunzi takes this notion of Heaven borrowed from others, turns it around, and uses it to attack his rivals while defending the *ru* tradition.

This brings us to a final noteworthy feature of Xunzi's thought, namely his engagement with competing views. Besides his conception of Heaven, his use of the terms "emptiness," "single-mindedness," and "stillness" in [chapter 21](#) and the analogy there between the heart and a mirror are further examples of his incorporating into his own view ideas that seem to have originated among rival thinkers. More generally, it is clear from the text that Xunzi is familiar with nearly all the major intellectual currents of the Warring States era. He learned from them, even from thinkers vehemently opposed to the *ru*, yet he is not hesitant to attack what he thinks is wrong, though it sometimes means criticizing a fellow member of his own tradition. In this respect, Xunzi presents an admirable model for philosophical activity, even in today's setting.

¹ In those instances, I have not provided explanations for why I chose not to translate those passages with rhyming English. Suffice it to say that when readers encounter passages that are noted as rhyming in the original, but do not rhyme in the translation, they may simply take it that I felt a rhyming translation at that point would have forced an unacceptably large sacrifice of accuracy.

² Lau (1970, p. 8).

³ Despite Liu's remark about eliminating duplicates, there are still various places in the text where a passage appears verbatim or nearly verbatim in one or more chapters. I have noted these instances in the translation for purposes of aiding comparisons across chapters.

⁴ A number of points in this paragraph are taken from Knoblock (1988, vol. 1, pp. 123–24, 128).

⁵ Since there have been many alternate names for Xunzi, the text has likewise had a number of different titles over time. See note 7 below.

⁶ See Qian (2008, p. 688), Beida Zhhexuexi (1979, pp. 613–19), You (1982), and Knoblock (1982–83).

⁷ In addition, the family name Xun 荀 in "Xunzi" appears in some early texts as Sun 孫. As a result, Xunzi is sometimes referred to as Sun Qing 孫卿, and sometimes the appellation *zi* 子 ("Master") is added to the "Qing" to yield "Xun Qingzi" or "Sun Qingzi." Since our text is named after the person, the text has likewise been called by these alternate names at points in time. For discussion of Xunzi's family name, see Knoblock (1988, vol. 1, pp. 233–39).

⁸ In this translation, I do not indicate the passages that overlap with other early texts, on the grounds that tracing textual overlaps, comparing the parallels, and assigning authorship are issues mainly of interest to graduate students and specialists, rather than beginning students and those reading simply for philosophical content. Readers interested in textual overlaps are advised to consult Knoblock's translation, which contains quite extensive discussions of the matter.

⁹ For other examples of such nonhistorical ways of speaking, compare discussions of fictional characters. Since Sherlock Holmes is not a real person, claims such as "Sherlock Holmes is a genius" are false, if taken as historical claims about a real person. However, such claims are usually neither offered nor received as historical claims. Anyone who would completely bar such ways of speaking on the grounds that they are historically inaccurate is insisting on the priority of the historical perspective in all cases, which is obviously an extreme position requiring substantial arguments to make it even remotely plausible.

¹⁰ Some might worry that this manner of speaking may still encourage historically inaccurate views. Here is not the appropriate place to engage in lengthy discussion of the matter, so on this occasion I reply merely by noting that a

manner of speaking has the potential to be misunderstood in one way or another. Which sorts of misunderstanding are more important to try to prevent and the lengths to which one should go to try to prevent them will depend upon one's purposes, audience, etc., and per the previous footnote, it is hardly obvious that avoiding false views about historical matters should always have the highest priority.

¹¹ Archaeological findings seem to confirm the existence of King Wen, King Wu, and the Duke of Zhou, but not necessarily their status as moral paragons. As yet, there is no archaeological support for the existence of Yao, Shun, Yu, and Tang, who are now generally viewed as mythical, though many early Chinese people believed them to be real, historical persons.

¹² The *Xunzi*'s use of *ru* largely conforms to the word's earlier sense, and there are places where rendering it as "Confucianism" would conflict with the context, so I have left it untranslated.

¹³ My description here is intentionally vague, to accommodate various differences in early texts. More explanation of the terms and other concepts mentioned here is provided in [appendix 1](#).

¹⁴ In this introductory section, however, I use "virtue" to refer just to morally good traits, rather than as a translation for *de*.

¹⁵ Per the previous section, the extent to which we can attribute views to particular named figures in early China is highly subject to question from the standpoint of historical accuracy. Nevertheless, in presenting the ideas of Xunzi (as explained earlier) here and below I retain the reference to particular individuals, because that is how Xunzi views the matter—he treats them as the views of particular *people*, and I am speaking from his perspective.

¹⁶ Xunzi does not name anyone as favoring the hegemon ideal, but proposals that would come close to it (at least to his ear) can be found in texts such as the *Han Feizi* and the *Shangjun Shu (Book of Lord Shang)*, and such a view may have been favored by many actual rulers and government officials in the Warring States period.

¹⁷ Very helpful discussions of these questions can be found in Kline and Ivanhoe (2000).

¹⁸ Despite his devotion to these rituals, Xunzi often omits the details on what they require, perhaps because he thinks his audience already knows or can easily discover these details. Some bodies of ritual lore from early China have come down to us in three texts, the *Liji* 禮記, the *Zhouli* 周禮, and the *Yili* 儀禮, but it is unclear to what extent the rituals as Xunzi conceives them are the same as what is described in those texts.

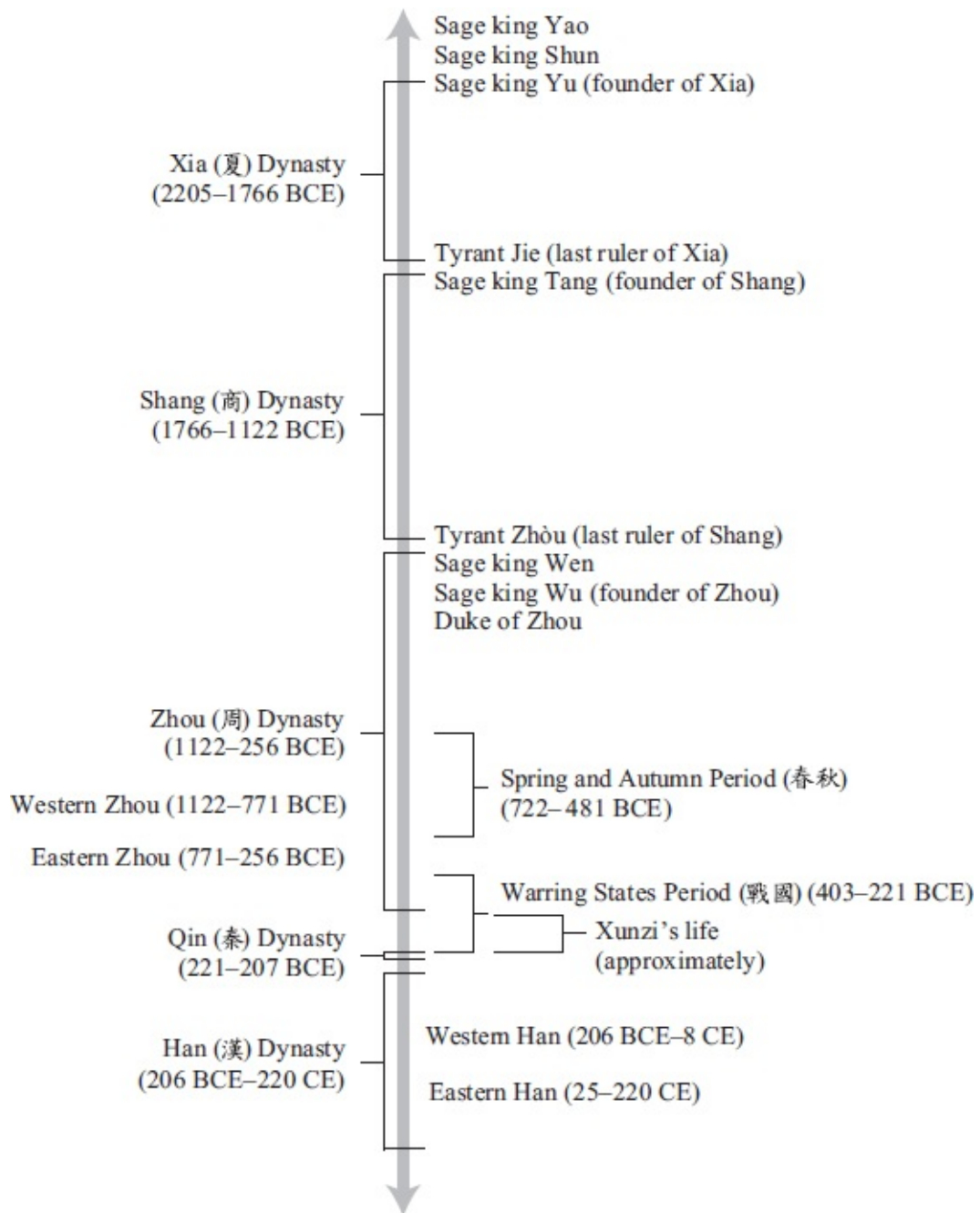
¹⁹ This view, however, also leaves many puzzles. As one example, Xunzi maintains that the sages had the same bad nature as everyone else does, so it is reasonable to wonder how they ever overcame their bad nature to create the rituals in the first place. Xunzi never gives a clear answer to the question himself, and scholars have debated what he could or should have said. For a provocative and stimulating suggestion on this topic, see Nivison (1996).

²⁰ Of course, one can still question whether Xunzi is really right about this point, and whether Mozi's views really fail in this regard.

²¹ See Berkson (2014).

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