

Xun Zi in the Intellectual Context of Early China

Reply to Perspectives of European Scholars

From November to December in 2001, supported by an ESF travel grant, I visited four Sinological departments in Europe: at München University, Tübingen University, the Catholic University of Leuven, and Vienna University. With each visit, I held a presentation on the socio-political theory of Xun Zi (c. 316-235 BC). Here, I will reflect on the valuable questions and criticisms raised by the scholars of the aforementioned institutes to my representation of Xun Zi's thought.

Report >
China

By Masayuki Sato

Xun Zi synthesized major lines of pre-Qin thought which were categorized as Confucianism, Daoism, Mohism, Legalism, Logical thought, and so on., despite his own firm self-styled orthodox successor of the idea of Confucius. A great scale of amalgamation of various thoughts of his time enabled him to provide the succeeding Han dynasty with an ideal blueprint for the broad ideological basis for the state institution of the Han which has been known as 'li' (rituals and social norms). Han intellectuals considered the concept of rituals and social norms to be the most cardinal element for attaining the Han state institution. This idea is shown in Sima Qian's (ca. 140-?) arrangement that he put the 'Li shu' (Book of Rituals and Social Norms) on the top of the 'Six Books' in his Shiji (The Historical Records).

However, the fact that the extant Book of Xunzi consists of a highly articulated theoretical exposition of the rituals and norms which were supposed to be embodied in the Han state and society can cause a suspicion that the extant Book of Xunzi was not written by Xun Zi, but by the Han intellectuals such as Liu Xiang (ca. 77-6 BC) who was the prominent bibliographer who set the composition of the Book of Xunzi on basically the present form. The discussion below evolves the problems on the textual authenticity of the Book of Xunzi, and Xun Zi's influence on the formation of the Han state institution.

Question: Is it not possible that the extant Book of Xun Zi, should contain the thought of Liu Xiang, and accordingly the 'high level of integration' in his thought reflects the Han thought? (prof. R. Ptak, München University)

Reply: Needless to say, all the Warring States philosophical works are exposed to the doubt of their textual authenticity. Although I am inclined to regard the Book of Xun Zi as substantially his synthesis of preceding ideas and arguments rather than that which can be clearly divided into Xun Zi's own and his disciples'. Yet, it is very important to think about where this high level of integration in his work came from and your assumption is worth being put to our serious consideration. According to my research, we cannot find specific evidence that Liu Xiang inserted his own argument into the

extant text of the Book of Xun Zi. First of all, Xun Zi's work are quoted fairly extensively in a number of the Han treatises such as the Hanshi Waizhuan and the 'Book of (State) Rituals' in the Shiji. In particular, the Hanshi waizhaun was the work of the early-middle Former Han period, this proves that at least those parts had existed before Liu Xiang's period. Furthermore, in his Preface, Liu Xiang clearly states that his compilation work of the text was proceeded just by means of 'removal of the overlapping parts.' As he wrote, when he dealt with the manuscript of Xun Zi's work, there were as many as 322 bundles of Xun Zi's manuscript. Under the condition that so many manuscripts of Xun Zi were preserved by his time, it was totally unnecessary for Liu Xiang to 'add to' or 'revise' Xun Zi's manuscript. Therefore, Liu Xiang's remark that he 'removed overlapping parts' is sufficiently reliable. However, all these my argument do not support the point that the extant Xunzi was Xun Zi's own work.

Question: Can we see any influence of Xun Zi's thought on the contemporary Chinese state institution and political operation? (prof. R. Trappl, Vienna Univ.)

Reply: No one would believe that the Confucian legacy in state institution and political operation in contemporary China (and also in Korea and Japan) was entirely wiped out. Characteristics in East Asian politics, e.g. geriatric rule, nepotism, a strong sense for saving face, and an excessive concern with the total personality of politicians, cannot be understood without Confucian political culture. The problem is that it is extremely difficult to discern one's Confucianism (e.g. Mencius) from another's (e.g. Xun Zi's). What makes the situation more complicated is that Xun Zi has been demoted from orthodox down to heterodox by Neo-Confucianists, and, consequently, modern scholars in post-Neo Confucian period have usually associated Confucian characteristics with the thought of Confucius and Mencius. It is true that major Confucian moral values such as ren (benevolence), yi (righteousness) and even li (rituals and social norms) were not Xun Zi's invention. What I can argue here is that if the form and ideology of the Han dynasty was predominant major source for the dynastic politics onward, the impact of Xun Zi's thought on the following history was also considerably great. In other words,

the institution and ideology of the Han dynasty has been taken into form under the overwhelming influence of Xun Zi's thought. I would like to focus on three points as follows: First, it is widely known that the state rituals of the Han dynasty were 'installed' by the hand of Shusun Tong, a realist Confucian, who survived the sanguinary warfare from the collapse of Qin to the final victory of Han. Therefore, from the beginning, the core of the Han state institution was doomed to be developed under the Confucian framework. Pertinently, the idea behind the installation of the Han state rituals that 'the appropriate state rituals embody appropriate socio-political order' is the echo of Xun Zi's political philosophy. Second, it is of no doubt that the prominent Han intellectuals such as Han Ying, Sima Qian, Dong Zhongshu, and Liu Xiang highly respected Xun Zi. It was them who greatly contributed to the promotion of Confucian value as the state ideology of the Han dynasty. In other words, Xun Zi's thought exhibited an overwhelming persuasive power to the Han intellectuals. And third, it is also broadly known that Xun Zi critically contributed the transmission of the Canonical studies by means of integrating them into the curriculum of his Confucian teaching. It was fairly natural that a system of thought which could successfully systematized the great amount of intellectual heritage of that civilization would ultimately lead the state ideology of that society. <



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Lastly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the financial support by ESF which enabled me to realize this trip and the people, in addition to those mentioned above, particularly Prof. Hans van Ess of München University, Dr Heidi Dumreicher of Institute for Urban Sustainability, and Mrs. Evelyn Ellwart-Mitsanas of Tübingen University, without whose help I could not have completed this trip with such great success!