

Chinese Cultural Studies:
Xunzi Hsun-tse
Selections From Xunzi (c. 213 BCE)

A Discussion of Heaven

Constant principles underlie Heaven's behavior. Heaven does not prevail because you are the sage Yao or disappear because you are the tyrant Jie.

Blessings result when you respond to Heaven by creating order; misfortune results when you respond to it with disorder. When you concentrate on agriculture and industry and are frugal in expenditures, Heaven cannot impoverish your state. When you store provisions and act quickly in emergencies, Heaven cannot inflict illness on your people. When you are singleminded in your cultivation of the Way, Heaven cannot send disasters.

Thus, even if they come, droughts and floods will not bring starvation, extremes of temperature will not bring illness, uncanny phenomena will not prove unlucky.

On the other hand, if you ignore agriculture and industry and spend extravagantly, then Heaven cannot make your country rich. If you are negligent concerning provisions and slow to respond to crises, Heaven cannot keep your country whole. If you renounce the Way and act recklessly, Heaven cannot make you lucky. In such a case, starvation will result even without flood or drought; illness will occur even without severe weather; misfortunes will occur without any uncanny phenomena. Even though the seasons are identical to those of an orderly age, the resulting fortune or misfortune is different. But you should not resent Heaven. It is your Way that is responsible. Thus those who can distinguish what is in the realm of Heaven from what is in the realm of man are men of the highest order....

Are order and disorder the product of Heaven? I say, the sun and the moon, the stars and the constellations are the same as they were in the time of Yu and Jie. Yu brought order, Jie created disorder, so order and disorder do not come from Heaven. Are they a product of the seasons? I say, plants sprout and grow in spring and summer, and are harvested and stored in fall and winter, just the way they were during the reigns of Yu and Jie. Yet Yu brought order, Jie disorder, so order and disorder are not the product of seasons. Is it land then? I say, obtaining land leads to life, losing it leads to death, just as in the time of Yu and Jie. Yet Yu brought order, Jie disorder, so order and disorder are not a product of land....

Why does it rain after a prayer for rain? I say, for no reason. It is the same as raining when you had not prayed. When there is an eclipse of the sun or moon, you "save" it; when there is a drought, you pray for rain; when an important decision is to be made, you divine. It is not that you can get anything by doing so. It is just decoration. Hence, the gentleman considers them ornament, but the common people think spirits are involved. To consider them ornament is auspicious; to consider them as spiritual acts is inauspicious.

A Discussion of Ritual

Where does ritual come from? I say, people have desires from the time they are born. When they

want something they do not get, they inevitably try to get it. When there are no limits imposed on how they can try to get it, they inevitably struggle for it.

Struggles lead to disorder, disorder to exhaustion. The ancient kings detested disorder and so instituted ritual and moral principles to set shares, thus satisfying people's desires and supplying their wants. They saw to it that desires and the supply of goods were kept in balance. This is how ritual began....

Sacrifices are concerned with the feelings of devotion and longing. Feelings of depression and melancholy cannot be prevented from occasionally arising

Thus, even when enjoying himself in pleasant company, a loyal official or a filial son will occasionally be overcome by grief. If he is greatly moved by his

feelings, but he restrains himself and does not express them, he will be incomplete in ritual. Therefore the ancient kings established ways to fulfill the principle of honoring those deserving honor and expressing closeness to relatives.

Hence, sacrifices are concerned with the feeling of devotion and

longing. They fulfill loyalty, faith, love, and respect. Ritual conduct is the perfection of decorum. Only sages can fully understand this. Sages comprehend

it, gentlemen comfortably carry them out, officials preserve them, and the common people consider them to be the custom. Gentlemen consider them to

be art of the way of man; common people think they have something to do with ghosts..

Human Nature Is Bad

Human nature is bad. Good is a human product. Human nature is such that people are born with a love of profit. If they follow these inclinations, they

will struggle and snatch from each other, and inclinations to defer or yield will die.

They are born with fears and hatreds. If they follow them, they will

become violent and tendencies toward good faith will die. They are born with sensory desires for pleasing sounds and sights. If they indulge them, the

disorder of sexual license will result and ritual and moral principles will be lost. In other words, if people accord with human nature and follow their

desires, they inevitably end up struggling, snatching, violating norms, and acting with violent abandon. Consequently, only after men are transformed by teachers and by ritual and moral principles do they defer, conform to culture, and abide in good order. Viewed this way, it is obvious that human nature is bad and good is a human product.

A warped piece of wood must be steamed and forced before it is made straight; a metal blade must be put to the whetstone before it becomes sharp.

Since the nature of people is bad, to become corrected they must be taught by teachers and to be orderly they must acquire ritual and moral principles.

When people lack teachers, their tendencies are not corrected; when they do not have ritual and moral principles, then their lawlessness is not controlled. In antiquity the sage kings recognized that men's nature is bad and that their tendencies were not being corrected and their lawlessness controlled. Consequently, they created rituals and moral principles and instituted laws and limitations to give shape to people's feelings while correcting them, to transform people's emotional nature while guiding it. Thus all became orderly and conformed to the Way. Those people today who are transformed by teachers, accumulate learning, and follow ritual and moral principles are gentlemen. Those who indulge their instincts, act impulsively, and violate ritual and moral principles are inferior people. Seen from this perspective, it is obvious that human nature is bad, and good is a human product.

Mencius said that people's capacity to learn is evidence that their nature is good. I disagree. His statement shows he does not know what human nature is and has not pondered the distinction between what is human nature and what is created by man. Human nature is what Heaven supplies. It cannot be learned or worked at. Ritual and moral principles were produced by the sages; they are things people can master by study and effort. Human nature refers to what is in people but which they cannot study or work at achieving. Human products refers to what people acquire through study and effort

Now it is human nature to want to eat to one's fill when hungry, to want to warm up when cold, to want to rest when tired. These all are a part of people's emotional nature. When a man is hungry and yet on seeing an elder lets him eat first it is because he knows he should yield. When he is tired but does not dare rest, it is because he knows it is his turn. When a son yields to his father, or a younger brother yields to his elder brother, or when a son takes on the work for his father or a younger brother for his elder brother, their actions go against their natures and run counter to their feelings. And yet these are the way of the filial son and the principles of ritual and morality. Thus, if people followed their feelings and nature, they would not defer or yield, for deferring and yielding run counter to their emotional nature. Viewed from this perspective, it is obvious that man's nature is bad and good is a human product.

Fanruo and Jushu were great bows of ancient times, but they could not on their own have become accurate without being pressed and straightened.

The great swords of ancient times -- Duke Huan's Cong, King Wen's Lu, Lord Zhuang's Hu, and King Helii's Ganjiang, Moyeh, Juque, and Bilüi --

would never have become sharp without being put to the grindstone. Nor could they have cut without men using their strength. The great horses of

ancient times -- Hualiu, Qiji, Xianli, and Luer -- could never have run a thousand li in a day if they had not first been restrained by the bit and bridle,

taught to respond to the whip, and driven by someone like Zaofu. Similarly, a man may have a fine temperament and a discriminating mind, but he must

first seek a wise teacher to study under and good friends to associate with. If he studies with a wise teacher, what he hears will concern the way of

Yao, Shun, Yü, and Tang. If he finds good friends to associate with, what he observes will be loyalty, good faith, respect, and deference. Each day he will

come closer to humanity and morality without realizing it, all because of their influence. But if he lives with bad people, what he will hear will be deceit

and lies and what he will observe will be wild, undisciplined, greedy behavior. Without knowing it, he will end up a criminal, all because of their

indifference. It has been said, "If you do not know the man, observe his friends. If you do not know lord, look at his attendants." Influence affects

everyone.

From Patricia Ebrey, *Chinese Civilization : A Sourcebook*, 2d ed. (New York: Free Press, 1993), pp. 24-26