

The Symbiotic Relationship Between Xunzi's "Clear Division for Group Organization" Power Order and the Concept of the Body

Lizhao Zhang

Shanghai University of Finance and Economics University, Shanghai, 200433, China

ABSTRACT

During the tumultuous Warring States period, Xunzi, confronted with a chaotic society marked by disorganized communal living, sought to establish his ideal state. The core of Xunzi's ideal state lies in "establishing clear hierarchical divisions to organize communities," creating a stratified society that transcends blood ties. Beneath this phenomenon lies Xunzi's thoughts on human nature, power order, and the concept of the body. He reflected on the essence of humanity, believing that unbridled human desires would lead to the collapse of social order. Thus, it was necessary to transcend the traditional kinship-based mode of communal living and establish a hierarchical social order with "ritual" as its principle. The most significant hierarchical distinction within this order is the division between ordinary people and sages, which in turn gives rise to a power order. Although this power order is subtle and not easily discernible, it becomes manifest in the realm of the body, thereby forming a ritualized body. This concept of the ritualized body encompasses both discipline and the embodiment of knowledge. The embodiment of knowledge not only facilitates the internalization of individual morality but also accompanies the awakening of subjectivity. However, due to the vastness of the knowledge system and the disjuncture in ritual knowledge across different social classes, the process of "transforming inborn nature through conscious activity" can only promote intergenerational adjustments within the ritual system. In summary, Xunzi's governance technique of "body-ritual-power order" ensures the stability of the power structure while maintaining the potential for social mobility, thereby preventing the social order from becoming rigid.

KEYWORDS

Confucianism; Xunzi; Distinction and group formation; Discourse on rites; Body; Power order

1 The Social Construction of Xunzi's "Clearly Defined Divisions and Social Organization"

Xunzi's concept of "clearly defined divisions and social organization" (ming fen shi qun) is not a simple division based on bloodlines but represents a further development along the path established by Confucius and Mencius. Zheng Peng also points out that "in Xunzi's time, the world was on the verge of unification. The emerging centralized authoritarian politics urgently needed to build a foundation for order that broke through the limitations of kinship-based patriarchal organizations and expanded to social relations within non-kinship organizations." Firstly, Xunzi clearly defined the vertical hierarchical order: "Hence, exalting the worthy and employing the capable, establishing gradations between the noble and the humble, and differentiating the near and the distant, and ordering the old and the young—this was the Way of the former kings. Thus, when the worthy are exalted and the capable employed, then the ruler is honored and his subjects are tranquil. When there are gradations between the noble and the humble, then commands are carried out without obstruction. When there is a differentiation between the near and the distant, then [rewards and punishments] are applied without error. When there is order between the old and the young, then undertakings are brought to successful completion and there is [opportunity for] rest." This establishes the hierarchical distinctions within the group based on wisdom/foolishness, nobility/humbleness, and closeness/distance. Beyond this broad hierarchical division, Xunzi further distinguished between official positions: "Determine rank on the basis of inner power (de) and assign office by measuring ability." Secondly, Xunzi provided a horizontal division of the group: "Farmers are allotted fields to plough, merchants are allotted goods to trade, the various artisans are allotted tasks to encourage their work, officials and grand masters are allotted duties to administer, the rulers of the established feudal states are allotted territories to guard, the Three Dukes collectively deliberate over general policies, and then the Son of Heaven rests, simply holding himself in a state of reverent stillness." This passage points out that farmers, merchants, various artisans, officials and grand masters, and the rulers of feudal states each have their own duties, and members of society cannot simultaneously hold other occupations. However, this manifestation of social order is merely the blueprint constructed by Xunzi; its implementation process would inevitably be influenced by individual subjectivity. This illustrates that the phenomenon of Xunzi's "clearly defined divisions and social organization" and the resulting power order are merely a form of manifestation, not its essence.

Starting from the study of Xunzi's "theory of the person" (ren xue), Xunzi's theory is based on the innate aspects of humans, extending to their connection with society and forming an understanding of the acquired aspects of the person. Zhou Xianjin and Xu Lianqing analyze Xunzi's theory of the person from three dimensions: the existential dimension, the value dimension, and the practical dimension, arguing that the "person" in Xunzi's thought is essentially an interpretation from the perspective of cultural anthropology, placing humans as social beings characterized by ritual propriety (li yi) and morality. [6] Viewing Xunzi's theory of the person from this sociological perspective strengthens the value of the acquired

social nature of humans. However, Xunzi also discusses the innate aspects of human essence, and the two are closely related.

The innate aspect in Xunzi's theory of the person refers to his theory of human nature (xing lun). Regarding Xunzi's view of human nature, there is the theory of the inherent evilness of human nature. However, recent interpretations offer new perspectives. Wu Fei argues that "Xunzi's human nature is originally simple/pu," while Feng Bing holds that "Xunzi's human nature is originally natural," both placing Xunzi's theory of human nature in a primordial natural state. Xunzi said: "A straight piece of wood does not depend on the straightening board to be straight; it is its nature to be straight. A warped piece of wood must await the straightening board, steam, and force to become straight; it is because its nature is not straight." In this text, Xunzi compares the "straight wood" and "warped wood" to human nature, indeed indicating that human nature is in a natural state. Nature (xing) inherently lacks acquired moral good and evil, having only the distinction of "straight" and "warped." However, viewing Xunzi's theory of the person solely from a naturalistic perspective that transcends moral a priori theory obviously neglects the Confucian horizon. Xunzi said: "The likes and dislikes, happiness and anger, grief and joy of the nature are called emotions (qing)." Here he connects nature (xing) and emotions (qing). Where there are emotions, there are desires. Xunzi further stated: "[They] hunger and desire to be full, cold and desire to be warm, tired and desire to rest." This pushes the originally empty state of innate human nature into the realm of moral good and evil. Therefore, whether Xunzi's theory posits inherent evilness or original simplicity, both ultimately lead to the acquired formation of evil within the acquired moral system.

If desires are not restrained in the acquired state, they will lead to uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources, generate strife, and produce acquired moral evil. This strife would cause the social order to collapse. Therefore, we can see Xunzi's recognition and reflection on the world he inhabited; he attributed the origin of chaos to the individual itself. From a contemporary perspective, this view overlooks individual subjectivity, but it is not entirely so. Simultaneously, Xunzi also recognized that the individual cannot survive completely independently of the group. He said: "If people live apart and do not serve one another, they will be impoverished; if they live together but without social divisions, they will struggle. Poverty is a calamity, and struggle is a disaster. To rescue them from calamity and rid them of disaster, there is no better way than to clearly define social divisions and organize them into groups." Thus, Xunzi already recognized that living in groups is an inevitable phenomenon, while also pointing out that if individuals live together without distinctions, strife will arise.

In summary, the primary basis for these classifications was to achieve social division of labor and enable the rational distribution of limited material resources. Therefore, Xunzi's theory of "clearly defined divisions and social organization," which transcends the natural state of classification, possesses greater rational value. This rational value is manifested in Xunzi tracing the problem of social resource distribution back to human nature. Furthermore, the construction of Xunzi's "clearly defined divisions and social organization" proceeds from the perspective of his theory of the person, and within this blueprint for social order, his thought on the power order is simultaneously present.

2 The Manifestation of the Power Order Through the Conception of the Body in Xunzi's "Clearly Defined Divisions and Social Organization"

The previous section explained that the phenomenon of Xunzi's "clearly defined divisions and social organization" is constructed upon his theory of the person, from which his thought on the power order arises. Xunzi's theory of the person is also the source for the construction of his conception of the body (shenti guan). Hence, it is evident that Xunzi's conception of the body and the power order under the phenomenon of "clearly defined divisions and social organization" have a symbiotic relationship, co-emerging from his theory of the person.

Xunzi believed that transformation through ritual propriety (li yi) is a crucial external factor influencing the individual. Kang Yu argues that "Xunzi emphasized the role of external force. The core of his thought lies in using the method of 'conscious activity' (wei) to prompt people to live a life of ritual propriety, thereby enabling the body to escape practical difficulties and obtain abundant vitality." Furthermore, ritual propriety is not only part of the blueprint for Xunzi's ideal state but also one of the means to achieve it. The transformation through ritual propriety entails requirements not only for the physical form but also norms for internal moral ethics. The requirements for the physical form are manifested in the system of rituals and ceremonies, while the internal ethical norms are manifested in the internalization of self-cultivation (xiu shen).

Xunzi further incorporated the body into a hierarchical network of power structures through the system of ritual propriety, achieving the integration of order from the individual to the group—that is, hierarchical order is embodied. Based on this, it can also be inferred that Xunzi sought stability in the social hierarchy, requiring individuals to perform their respective roles and duties. Regarding Xunzi's concept of ritual (li), it is not only an abstract set of rules and norms but is also constructed through embodied symbols such as clothing and demeanor. For instance, distinguishing social

strata by widening the sleeves of officials and grand masters to restrict their range of movement. Moreover, the "Xunzi · Wangzhi" states: "There are regulations for clothing, measures for palaces and chambers, fixed numbers for followers and attendants, and all instruments for funerals and sacrifices have their appropriate grades." This indicates that the symbolic system of ritual always needs to consider the combination of material conditions and bodily practice, and also shows that the core of the ritual symbolic system lies in bodily symbols.

Considering Xunzi's thought on funerals and mourning, his statement "In the three years' mourning, the weeping is not prolonged in a continuous outflow. In the songs of the Pure Temple, one person leads the singing and three others join in the sighing. They hang one bell, and still use the hand drum and the pellet drum. They use vermilion strings and pierce the bottom [of the lute to make the sound melancholy]—all this is one and the same principle." combines mourning garments with the ritual system not only based on grief for the deceased but also emphasizes regulation through ritual laws to avoid excessive emotion and formalism. This disciplinary power resonates with Foucault. The body, at this point, becomes the carrier of the ritual system. Ritual, through the discipline of the body, makes the body and the ritual system co-existent. This also means that the body is segmented into a basic unit of the social order under the ritual system. However, unlike Foucault's unidirectional power discipline, Xunzi binds knowledge production and bodily practice together. "Ritual" is not merely a behavioral manual but a cognitive framework that constructs the "ultimate standard of the Way of humanity." Power is inherent in this process, transmitted intergenerationally through bodily memory. Here, intergenerational transmission transforms coercive norms into unconscious patterns of behavior, passed down through generations. On the other hand, individuals can also acquire correct judgment, forming knowledge-producing actions, which also enables individuals to acquire the ability to transcend their class. This indicates that the difference between ruler and people does not lead to class solidification but allows for fluidity. The statement in the "Xunzi · Xing E" chapter that "the man in the street can become a Yu" emphasizes the possibility for common people to break through the "divisions" (fen) through self-cultivation.

This structural theory still faces dilemmas and paradoxes, namely the unavoidable aspect of agency. There is the aspect where "although they are the sons and grandsons of commoners, if they accumulate culture and learning, they can advance to be chief ministers." As elaborated earlier, Xunzi's "ritual" has a dimension of knowledge production. Therefore, individuals influenced by "ritual" will develop corresponding reflections on the ritual system, engaging in creative interpretations, thus leading to "embodied" acts of resistance. These "embodied" acts of resistance exist between the bodily symbols of the individual and the social stratification of the group, creating a dynamic tension between the two, indicating that the power order under Xunzi's "clearly defined divisions and social organization" is not a static state. As mentioned before, the ritual system not only disciplines the body but also endows individuals with the capacity for knowledge development. Therefore, the body is malleable, and this malleability can influence power to a certain extent. For example, in the Han Dynasty, commoners used paper money instead of human sacrifices. This seemingly contradictory behavior actually demonstrated the people's loyalty to the sacrificial system itself while also representing a counteraction and subversion of the nobility's monopoly on material resources, fitting the logic of resistance described by de Certeau. However, such embodied resistance also has its limits. Firstly, there is the monopoly of "cultural capital of ritual propriety" (li yi zi ben). The norms of ritual propriety require long-term bodily discipline to internalize into muscle memory. The decade required to learn the rites formed a natural barrier for the lower laboring classes. The institutional exclusion making it difficult for those of humble origin to achieve high office also stems from this. Moreover, this invisible threshold of "cultural capital of ritual propriety" is actually more easily assimilated into the social structure than the explicit "excellence in learning leads to office." Does this, then, suggest that Xunzi's "clearly defined divisions and social organization" exists in a static space, where self-cultivation merely serves to better perform one's functional duties, thereby severing the inherently communal state and leading to the breakdown of bonds between people, while class solidification leads to a monopoly of power? However, Xunzi recognized the strong subjectivity of the individual; therefore, he did not give an affirmative answer to the question "Are kings and nobles given their high status by birth?"

3 The Influence of Bodily Practice on the Potential Fluidity of Class

Xunzi viewed the body both as the carrier of desires and as the carrier of the ritual system. This dual symbolic meaning makes the "body" in Xunzi's thought a contested field of tension between impulsive desires and ritual constraints. Consequently, Xunzi employed bodily practice (shenti shijian) as a method to transform the biological body into a ritual body, elevating desires to the level of power recognition to reconcile this contradiction.

While the body possesses subjectivity, enabling individuals, whether passively receiving ritual teachings or actively studying, to accumulate corresponding cultural capital, which in certain eras grants individuals the possibility to transcend their status, the process of learning the rites is protracted. That is, individuals need prolonged immersion in knowledge. Furthermore, the class barriers inherent in ritual education make transcending one's "division" (fen) extremely difficult in real society. Even if knowledge permeates class boundaries to some extent, the expression of knowledge-

power on the body still confines class mobility to an elastic space of intergenerational transmission, thus rendering it only a potential fluidity.

Xunzi believed that the people's acceptance of ritual is not merely a state of passive reception by an object; the body possesses a dimension of subjectivity. Zhang Keyue argues that overseas Confucian researchers often "attempt to find a motivation for morality external to the practicing subject, failing to notice that the subject can naturally arrive at morality entirely through rational practice." This view emphasizes the role of the heart-mind (xin) in the process of bodily practice.

Xunzi's core aim remained governing the state and administering policy, and the key to the state lies in the stability of the social order. Therefore, Xunzi's method of ritual education was not imposed violently but utilized the social environment and teachers for instruction. From the perspective of the teacher (shi), the "Book of Documents · Zhou Guan" says: "Establish the Grand Preceptor, the Grand Mentor, and the Grand Guardian; these are the Three Dukes." The Duke of Zhou, Dan, held the dual positions of Grand Preceptor and Chief Minister, effectively elevating the position of "teacher" to a height of political authority, closely linking education with state governance. Additionally, the "Book of Rites · Wen Wang Shizi" states: "A teacher is one who teaches through affairs and makes [the student] understand virtue." This clarifies the role of the teacher, demonstrating the status of teachers in traditional Chinese culture. Xunzi held a similar view. The "Xunzi · Dalüe" states: "When a state is about to flourish, it is sure to honor its teachers and value instruction." The "Xunzi · Quanxue" states: "In learning, nothing is more expedient than to associate with the right person (teacher)." Xunzi also elevated honoring the teacher as the foundation of statecraft, placing the "teacher" in a supremely high position. The characteristic of the teacher lies in enlightening instruction. The Xiang commentary on the "I Ching · Meng Hexagram" states: "The superior man, in accordance with this, decides his conduct and nurtures his virtue," viewing education as the practice of enlightening the Way of Heaven. On the one hand, the people's bodies can only perform the duties prescribed by the ritual norms of their class; on the other hand, bodily experience and knowledge production lead to reflection on the ritual teachings, subsequently generating micro-level resistance..

References

- [1] Xunzi. Xunzi [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2014.
- [2] Qian Jinyu. The Theoretical Shaping of Chinese-Style Rule of Law Modernization and Traditional Chinese Legal Culture—Taking Xunzi's Governance Doctrine and Its Contemporary Value as an Example [J]. *Journal of Northwest University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 2024, 54(05): 87-98.
- [3] Dongfang Shuo. "Why" and "How"—A Reflection on Xunzi's Order Problem [J]. *Guanzi Journal*, 2024, (03): 22-33.
- [4] Zheng Peng. "Clarifying Divisions to Organize Groups": Xunzi's Social Taxonomy as a Mechanism for Social Ordering [J]. *Sociological Review*, 2024, 12(04): 31-53.
- [5] Shen Shunfu. Homo Sapiens Is "Homo Sapiens": A Study of Xunzi's Homo Sapiens Theory [J]. *Journal of Zhuzi Studies*, 2023, (01): 180-193.
- [6] Zhou Xianjin, Xu Nelumbo Nucifera Qing. A Study of Xunzi's Homo Sapiens Thought from the Perspective of His Ritual Theory [J]. *Hunan Social Sciences*, 2022, (02): 21-30.
- [7] Wu Fei. Xunzi's Theory of Human Nature from the Perspective of the Refinement and Substance Debate—With a Commentary on the Debate Over the Theory of Innate Simplicity [J]. *Confucius Studies*, 2023, (02): 75-88+158.
- [8] Feng Bing. Nature Is Innate, Good and Evil Arise from the Mind—Xunzi as a "Naturalist" on Homo Sapiens Nature [J]. *Philosophical Trends*, 2024, (05): 46-54.
- [9] Xu Shen. *Shuowen Jiezi* [M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1963: 166.
- [10] With a Discussion on China's Response to the Crisis in Western Philosophy [J]. *Journal of Linyi University*, 2019, 41(04): 18-26.
- [11] Wang Shishun (trans. & annot.). *Shangshu* [M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2012: 467.
- [12] Kong Yingda. *Liji Zhengyi* [M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1980: 843.