Textual Notes—Xunzi

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Because *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* is intended as an introductory text for those without any knowledge of classical Chinese, discussion of textual matters has been reserved for this website. The following notes are intended only for those who are familiar both with the ancient language and with the Chinese texts of the *Xunzi* in particular, so no attempt has been made to render them intelligible to the non-specialist reader.

In translating the *Xunzi*, I relied mainly on Wang Xianqian’s text and commentary, along with the commentary by Li Disheng (李滌生,荀子集釋) and the one by the Peking University Philosophy Department (北大哲學系注釋, 荀子新注). I have often followed the readings or emendations suggested by one or the other of these commentaries without noting the source, in order to cut down on the number of notes. Therefore, readers who wish to know why I deviate from Wang Xianqian’s standard text or render it in an unusual way are advised to consult these commentaries as a first source for my interpretation. The notes below are primarily for those instances where I did not follow any established commentary or places where I followed a less-known commentary. In some cases, I have also provided explanations for preferring one commentator’s view to another’s.

(Chapter 1 - An Exhortation to Learning)

p. 251. “However, if you imitate the right person in his practice of the precepts of the gentleman, then you will come to honor these things for their comprehensiveness, and see them as encompassing the whole world.”

Most commentators take 尊 and 周 as referring to the student. However, the previous lines stress that one needs a teacher precisely because the various texts and practices alone will not give one correct understanding. Therefore, for Xunzi to speak of the student becoming honored and famous throughout the world (or alternatively, gaining all-encompassing knowledge) seems abrupt and out of place. I read 尊 and 周 as having an implied object, namely the principles and precepts underlying the materials studied, which are made clear by the teacher.

p. 251. “If you are going to take the former kings as your fount and make benevolence and righteousness your root, then rituals are exactly the highways and byways for you.”

The words 經緯 normally refer to the warp and woof of a loom. However, they can also refer to the main streets running north-south and east-west through a city (cf. 周禮,考工記). Understood thus, these two words fit better with 蹊徑, which also refer to roads, and in translating I
simplify all four to “highways and byways.”

p. 251-252. “It will be like the action of turning up your fur collar by simply curling your five fingers and pulling on it- it goes smoothly numberless times.”

I follow Wang Niansun in understanding 領 as 引. He further claims 順者不可勝數 also refers to the hairs of the fur collar. This is not implausible, but then the analogy does not fit so easily with the description of rituals as the right roads. I suggest that the fur collar image is intended to demonstrate the ease with which learning will proceed if done according to ritual, and the last sentence is meant to sum up by saying that all will go smoothly. Read thus, this section then forms a nice parallel with the rest of the paragraph, which first gives a condition (以詩書為之), then illustrations by analogy, and lastly a summation (不可以得之) which applies both to the analogies and to the point about learning.

p. 252. “Heaven shows off its brilliance, earth shows off its breadth, and the gentleman values his perfection.”

The switch from 見 to 貴 has puzzled many commentators. Perhaps it was motivated by the thought that while Heaven and Earth proudly display their most valuable qualities, the gentleman is ideally somewhat humble.

(Chapter 2 - Cultivating Oneself)

p. 253. “When you observe goodness in others, then inspect yourself, desirous of studying it.”

I follow Wang Niansun in understanding 存 as 察, because it preserves the parallel use of 自 as object of the verb in each line.

p. 253. “Use it to cultivate yourself and establish your fame/ then you will equal Yao and Yu.”

I take 過 as 過, following Wang Niansun. Commentators disagree whether 後 means “live longer” or “come second to.” Xunzi generally rejects superstition, so it is unlikely he believes ritual could really ensure longevity of such great magnitude. This consideration favors the latter reading, i.e. misusing ritual for physical cultivation will not result in such long life. Yet, Xunzi does state that following ritual preserves one’s health. This supports the first reading, and so I follow it instead. 自名 apparently troubled commentators because, e.g. in ch. 1, Xunzi says students should not use learning to seek fame. However, here his point may be that although one ought not seek recognition for one’s learning, if one winds up being renowned for morality, then one will be the equal of Yao and Yu.

p. 255. “For simple-minded rectitude or honest integrity, make it suitable
with ritual and music, and enlighten it with reflection.”

In these lines, 之 could refer to the person possessing the faults or the faults themselves. The passage is easier to render if 之 is the person, but then Xunzi sounds as though he is advising us on how to treat others. The method, however, is supposed to be for self-cultivation, so I take 之 as the faults. Commentators reject 通之以思善 because it is not parallel with the other sentences. Yet, Xunzi is not rigidly confined by parallelism. Since he mentions simple-minded goodness, it is quite natural to advise correcting it with reflection.

(Chapter 17 - Discourse on Heaven)

p. 263. “To long for things and appraise them/ How can this compare to ordering things and never losing them?”

The second 物 here is difficult, and commentators are divided. I favor Liu Shipei’s reading of it as 感度, because that seems more consistent with Xunzi’s use of 物 as a verb elsewhere. Compare HYIS 80/21/51-2.

(Chapter 21 - Undoing Fixation)

p. 272. “If they are of two minds, then they will be hesitant and confused.”

Transposing 疑 and 則, based on the argument of Long Yuchun, 答子論集.

p. 272. “They hate what they consider erroneous views of the Way, and others are seduced into following their same path.”

The traditional interpretation of 妒 as “jealous” is strange. How can one be jealous of the Dao? Or if 妒 here means jealously of people, then it seems out of place. Therefore, I take it in its more general sense as “hate,” and take 繾於道 as its object. The traditional reading of the latter half of the sentence is “Others mislead them through what they are inclined to.” This is also strange, because 誘 is usually followed by its object. The clause 其所遊 is not in the right place to express instrumentality with an active verb (i.e. one would expect 人以其所遊誘之). Instead, I suggest reading it as having a suppressed 於 (i.e. 人誘於其所遊) which makes 誘 passive and 其所遊 the agent of change; literally, “Others are drawn off by the place where they approach.”

p. 273. “How much more so in the case of that which is applying itself in the first place!”

The traditional reading suggests 蔽 instead of 使. I reject this as
unnecessary. See footnote for what I take to be the right construal. This passage foreshadows the remarks about the heart later in the chapter, which likewise stress that the heart must apply itself to itself in order to know the Dao.

p. 276. “And so I say: if the heart allows its choices to be without restraint, then necessarily it will display its own objects as broadly varying.”

The more popular reading of this section is, “The condition of the heart is such that its choices are without [external] restraint- rather, it is sure to show itself through them. And even though its objects are broadly varied, at the utmost of its refinement, it is undivided.” I reject this reading because it seems an unusually strained way of reading the sentence, and instead I follow Yang Liang’s reading.

p. 276. “There is a person who is incapable of any of their three skills, but who can be put in charge of any of these offices, namely the one who is expert in regard to the Way, not the one who is expert in regard to things.”

Following Yu Yue.

(Chapter 22 - On Correct Naming)

p. 278. “In applying various names to the myriad things, they followed the set customs and generally agreed usage of the Xia.”

Here I follow Long Yuchun’s punctuation and reading of 曲期, though with hesitation.

p. 278. “That by which people are able to do things is called ‘ability.’”

Dropping the initial 智 as accidently repeated.