# Xun Zi in the Intellectual Context of Early China:

# Replies to Perspectives of European Scholars [PART 1 | TWO-PART SERIES]

**From November to December in 2001, supported by an ESF travel grant, I visited four Sinological departments in Europe: München University, Tübingen University, Catholic University of Leuven, and Vienna University. On each visit, I made a presentation on the socio-political theory of Xun Zi (c. 316-235 BC). What follows are reflections on the valuable questions and criticisms raised by the scholars of the aforementioned insititutes to my representation of Xun Zi's thought.**

*By Masayuki Sato*

Mencius and Xun Zi are two of the most well-known defenders of Confucian teaching during the Warring States period. Just as Aristotle's philosophy had done in the West, Xun Zi's socio-political theory critically influenced the formation of state institutions and ideology in Chinese and other East Asian dynastic history. Xun Zi's thought has been gaining in popularity since the mid-1990s, especially among young Western scholars. Apart from P. Goldin's work, published in 1999 in the US, at least five doctoral dissertations have been written about Xun Zi's philosophy.

My representation of Xun Zi's thought can be summarized into three main points: first, the goal of Xun Zi's socio-political theory is the attainment of Order, more concretely, the "recovery" of the order of human society as manifested in the order of Heaven and Earth. This also represents the triad structure in Xun Zi's world view. The inquiry into the Order and triad structure in such a world view are salient features of what I call the Jixia's analytical discourse. Second, Xun Zi advocated the concept of *Li*, or rituals and social norms, as the viable method for attaining social order. Hence, *Li* itself was not his theoretical goal. Third, I introduced three major functions of *Li* by which to recover the social order: (1) as the method for manufacturing an ethical ruler; (2) as the standard for investigating the morality of a person in order to recruit an appropriate high-ranking government official, i.e. the chief minister; and (3) as the highest emanative source in a political institution by which to invest statute and policies on a subordinate level with a moral basis or legitimacy for their implementation.

Each of my presentations was followed by a number of questions and comments by participants. Four from among them were so challenging that I needed more time to formulate responses. I present those responses below.

**Question 1:** *How does one determine the content of so-called "Jixia thought" if there are hardly any extant textual fragments that can be associated with it? (Prof. C. Defoort, Catholic University of Leuven)*

**Response:** When we refer to the thought of the so-called 'Jixia Masters', we usually follow the enumeration of Sima Qian (Ch. Forty-Six, the *Shiji*): Chunyu Kun, Zou Yan, Shen Dao, Tian Pian, and Huan Yuan. Unfortunately, most of their 'works' are fundamentally lost. The *Shenzi Fragments*, however, preserve a certain amount of Shen Dao's argument and can provide precious clues to delineate the characteristics of their thought. What I consider important are the following four points: first, Shen Dao developed the meaning of terms such as *fa* (law and regulation), *fen* (social distinction and the distribution of social and natural resources), and *shi* (authoritative position), with which one can analyse the dynamism of order and disorder of a state. In addition to the *Shenzi Fragments*, several criticisms on Shen Dao by the Warring States works, such as the *Zhuangzi*, the *Lüshi Chunqiu*, the *Xunzi*, and the *Hanfeizi*, verify this point. Second, we find the concept of the Trinity (i.e. Heaven, Earth, and Man/ruler) as an argumentative framework appearing simultaneously in the *Shenzi Fragments*, the *Guanzi* (in particular the so-called *Four Chapters*), and the *Lüshi chunqiu*. Since the *Shenzi Fragments* reflect more or less on the thought of Shen Dao, a prominent Jixia master, it would not be far-fetched to say that the Jixia masters explored the concept of the Trinity as the juxtaposition of natural order against social disorder, and this has consequently been reserved in these four works. Support for this can be found in Sima Qian's remarks that the Jixia masters engaged themselves in discourse on "order and disorder" (Chap. Seventy-Four, *Ibid.*). Third, according to Chapter 17.8 (Zhiyi) in the *Lüshi chunqiu*, in a dialogue with the king of Qi (perhaps King Xuan, c. 319-301 BC), another prominent Jixia master, Tian Pian, amazes the Qi king by proposing the principle concept, i.e. the concept of the Way in his discussion about the state affairs of the Qi. The bewilderment of the Qi king suggests that before the time of this dialogue, the Qi king was not accustomed to hearing about such metaphysical principles as the Way in the discussion of state affairs. This implies that the Jixia thinkers focused on universal social mechanisms rather than the individual political behaviour of rulers of their time. Fourth, the "summary" of Zou Yan's work is preserved in the *Lüshi chunqiu* and the *Shiji* of Sima Qian. Here we can also find Zou Yan's keen observations of social mechanisms which would cause dynastic change. In this way, we are able to reveal several characteristics of the Jixia thinkers, even though the amount of extant text materials are very limited.

**Question 2:** *Was Xun Zi a successor of the Jixia thought? If so, then it does not match the remark by Liu Xiang: "Xun Zi is described as a criticizer of the preceding Jixia masters." (Prof. H. Kogelschatz, Tübingen University)*

**Response:** Certainly, Liu Xiang's "Preface" to the *Xunzi* includes a passage, which says: "Xun Zi said that their words (i.e. Jixia masters) were not the teaching of the Ancient Kings." I would argue that, in order to interpret the significance of this remark, it is also important to take into consideration the fact that, in Liu Xiang's time, Chinese intellectuals have associated any thinker with a school and, consequently, he contrasted Xun Zi's thought as an orthodox one (i.e. the teaching of the ancient sage kings or Confucianism) with that of other schools preceding him. As is seen in Sima Tan's (father of Sima Qian) *A Summary of Six Schools*, since the middle of the Former Han, the Han intellectuals categorized various Warring States thinkers into "schools" according to their understanding of their thought. Furthermore, a close reading of the other parts of Xun Zi's biography and a comparative textual analysis of the Jixia masters, such as Shen Dao and Xun Zi himself, we actually find more evidence of how deeply Xun Zi was influenced by his predecessors. For example, Xun Zi was appointed the Libationer (roughly translated as 'president') of the Jixia Academy three times, (Ch. Seventy-Four, the *Shiji*). Such a thing would be inconceivable unless we realize that Xun Zi's thought preserved, more or less, substantial intellectual accomplishments of preceding Jixia masters; it is difficult to accept that those who were fascinated by the thought of, for example, Shen Dao and Tian Pian would welcome those who would argue a completely different substance of thought from themselves. More importantly, Sima Qian describes Jixia thinkers as being concerned with the "quest for socio-political order", and it is indeed the theoretical goal of Xun Zi's political theory. In short, as the case of Mencius indicates, it is fairly probable that Xun Zi himself believed that his thought was completely different from his predecessors; yet, in my opinion, his renunciation shows rather his desperate effort to expose "fundamental difference" between his argument and theirs. ‹

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**Editors' note >**

The second and final part of this report will follow in the next issue of the IIAS Newsletter.