

*SELECTION FROM THE XUNZI: "ENCOURAGING LEARNING"*

**Introduction**

Xunzi (Xun Qing, or Xun Kuang: c. 310-c. 219 BCE) lived at the very end of the Zhou dynasty. Like Mencius, he was an advocate and interpreter of the teachings of Confucius. Living a generation after Mencius, Xunzi lived through the final, brutal wars which ended with the state of Qin absorbing and unifying all the Chinese feudal states. Xunzi was a widely traveled scholar, teacher, and official.

**Document Excerpts with Questions** (Longer selection follows this section)

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*Selection from the Xunzi:  
"Encouraging Learning"*

The learning of the noble person enters his ear, is stored in his mind, spreads through his four limbs, and is made visible in his activity and his tranquility. In his smallest word, in his slightest movement, in everything, he may be taken as a model and a standard. The learning of the lesser man enters his ear and comes out his mouth. With only four inches between ear and mouth, how can he possess it long enough to beautify a seven-foot body? In antiquity learning was carried on for the sake of one's self; today learning is carried on for the sake of others.<sup>1</sup> The learning of the noble person is for the sake of beautifying himself; the learning of the lesser man is offering bird and beast [to win attention from others]. ...

The noble person knows that what is not complete or what is not pure is unworthy to be called beautiful. Therefore he recites and reiterates so as to integrate it, reflects and ponders so as to comprehend it, determines his associations so that he may dwell in it, and eliminates what is harmful in order to preserve and nourish it. ... Therefore he cannot be subverted by power or profit, nor swayed by the masses and multitudes, nor unsettled by the whole world. He follows this in life; he follows it in death — this is what is called holding firm to inner power. He who holds firm to inner power is able to order himself; being able to order himself, he can then respond to others. He who is able to order himself and respond to others is called the complete

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<sup>1</sup> Quoting *Analects* 14:25. A similar idea is found in *Mencius* 4B:14. The idea is that learning is properly dedicated to self-improvement but often distorted in the interests of impressing others.

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man. Heaven manifests itself in its brightness; earth manifests itself in its breadth; the noble person values his completeness.

**Questions:**

1. What is the purpose of learning, as seen in these passages?
2. Compare Xunzi's understanding of learning and the purpose of learning with that of Jewish, Christian, and Hindu thinkers.
3. How does Xunzi distinguish between the "noble person" and the "lesser man"? What might be the social and political roles expected of the noble person?
4. What does Xunzi mean when he says that the "noble man" may be "taken as a model and a standard"?

**Longer Selection**

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The noble person says: Learning must never cease. Blue comes from the indigo plant, yet it is bluer than indigo. Ice is made from water, yet it is colder than water. Wood as straight as a plumb line may be bent into a wheel that is as round as if it were drawn with a compass, and, even after the wood has dried, it will not straighten out again because this is the way it has been bent. Thus wood marked by the plumb line will become straight, and metal that is put to the whetstone will become sharp. The noble person who studies widely and examines himself each day will become clear in his knowing and faultless in his conduct.

Therefore if you do not climb a high mountain, you will not know the height of Heaven; if you do not look down into a deep valley, you will not know the depth of the earth; and if you do not hear the words handed down from the ancient kings, you will not know the greatness of learning and inquiry. The children of Han and Yue and of the Yi and the Mo<sup>2</sup> all make the same sounds at birth, but as they grow up they have different customs because this is the way they have been educated. The Ode says,

O you noble men,  
Do not be constantly at ease and at rest.  
Be thoughtful in your official positions.

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<sup>2</sup> Han and Yue were ancient Chinese states; the Yi and the Mo were non-Chinese tribes.

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Love those who are upright and correct.  
And the spirits will heed you,  
And will increase your blessings.<sup>3</sup>

Of spirits there is none greater than being transformed through the Way; of blessings there is none more lasting than being without misfortune.

Once I spent an entire day in thought, but it was not as good as a moment of study. Once I stood on tiptoe to gaze into the distance, but it was not as good as climbing to a high place to get a broad view. Climbing to a high place and waving will not make your arm any longer, but you can be seen from farther away. Shouting down the wind will give your voice no added urgency, but you can be heard more distinctly. By borrowing a horse and carriage you will not improve your feet, but you can cover a thousand *li*. By borrowing a boat and paddles you will not improve your ability in water, but you can cross rivers and seas. The noble person is by birth no different from others, but he is good at borrowing from external things.

In the southern regions there is a bird called the *meng* dove. It makes its nest out of feathers woven together with hair and suspends it from the tips of the reeds. When the wind comes, the reeds break, the eggs are smashed, and the young are killed. This is not because the nest is wanting but, rather, because of the way it is attached. In the west there is a tree called the *yegan*. Its trunk is four inches tall, and it grows on top of high mountains, looking down into chasms a hundred fathoms deep. This is not because the tree's trunk is able to grow but, rather, because of the place where it stands. If raspberry vines grow in the midst of hemp, they will stand up straight without being staked; if white sand is mixed with mud, it too will turn black. If the root of the orchid and the rhizome of the valerian are soaked in the water used to wash rice,<sup>4</sup> the noble person will not go near them, and the commoner will not wear them — not because their substance is not beautiful but because of what they have been soaked in. Therefore the noble person will choose with care the place where he will reside, and will be accompanied by scholars when he travels. In this way he avoids depravity and meanness and approaches centrality and correctness.

Accumulate earth to make a mountain, and wind and rain will flourish there. Accumulate water to make a deep pool, and dragons will be born from it. Accumulate goodness to create virtue, and spiritual clarity will naturally be acquired; there the mind of the sage will be fully realized. Thus if you do not accumulate little steps, you will not have the means to journey a thousand *li*, and if you do not pile up small streams, you will have no way to fill a river or a sea. Though a thoroughbred like Qiji cannot cover ten paces in one leap, the sorriest nag can do it in ten yokings. Achievement consists of never giving up.

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<sup>3</sup> Ode 207.

<sup>4</sup> Following the reconstruction proposed by John Knoblock in *Xunzi—A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, vol. 1, pp. 137, 268–69.

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If you start carving, and then give up, you cannot even cut through a piece of rotten wood; but if you persist without stopping, you can carve and inlay metal or stone. Earthworms lack the power of sharp claws or teeth, or strong muscles or bones, yet above ground they feast on the mud, and below they drink at the yellow springs. This is because they keep their minds on one thing. Crabs have six legs and two pincers, but unless they can find an empty hole dug by a snake or a water serpent, they have no place to lodge. This is because they allow their minds to go off in all directions. Thus if there is no dark and dogged will, there will be no bright and shining clarity; if there is no dull and determined effort, there will be no brilliant and glorious achievement. One who travels two roads at once will arrive nowhere; one who serves two masters will please neither. ...

The learning of the noble person enters his ear, is stored in his mind, spreads through his four limbs, and is made visible in his activity and his tranquility. In his smallest word, in his slightest movement, in everything, he may be taken as a model and a standard. The learning of the lesser man enters his ear and comes out his mouth. With only four inches between ear and mouth, how can he possess it long enough to beautify a seven-foot body? In antiquity learning was carried on for the sake of one's self; today learning is carried on for the sake of others.<sup>5</sup> The learning of the noble person is for the sake of beautifying himself; the learning of the lesser man is offering bird and beast [to win attention from others]. Thus to proffer information when you have not been asked for it is called officiousness; to proffer information on two questions when you have only been asked about one is garrulity. Officiousness is to be condemned, so too is garrulity. The noble person is like an echo.

In learning nothing works so well as to be near a person of learning. The *Rites* and the "Music" provide models but no explanations. The *Odes* and the *Documents* are devoted to antiquity and lack immediacy. The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is laconic and not readily accessible. But following alongside a person of learning and repeating the explanations of the noble person bring one honor everywhere and allow one comprehensive knowledge of the world. Therefore it is said that "In learning nothing works so well as to be near a person of learning."

In the course of learning there is nothing more expedient than to devote yourself to a person of learning, and next to this is to pay homage to the rites. If you can neither devote yourself to a person of learning nor pay homage to the rites, how will you do anything more than learn randomly or passively follow the *Odes* and the *Documents*? In this case you will never to the end of your days escape from being merely a vulgar scholar. If you would take the ancient kings as your source and humaneness and rightness as your foundation, then rites are the means of correctly ordering warp and woof, pathways and byways. ...

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<sup>5</sup> See footnote 1, above.

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One who misses one shot in a hundred does not deserve to be called a good archer; one who does not take the last half step in a journey of a thousand *li* does not deserve to be called a good carriage driver; one who does not comprehend moral relationships and categories and does not become one with humaneness and rightness does not deserve to be called good in learning. Surely learning is learning to unify oneself. Someone who on departing does one thing and on entering does another is a person of the roads and alleys; one who does a small amount of good and much that is not good is a Jie or Zhou or Robber Zhi. Complete it, realize it to the fullest — only then will you be learned.

The noble person knows that what is not complete or what is not pure is unworthy to be called beautiful. Therefore he recites and reiterates so as to integrate it, reflects and ponders so as to comprehend it, determines his associations so that he may dwell in it, and eliminates what is harmful in order to preserve and nourish it. He causes his eyes to be devoid of any desire to see what is not right, his ears to be devoid of any desire to hear what is not right, his mouth to be devoid of any desire to say what is not right, and his mind to be devoid of any desire to think what is not right. Having arrived at this, he takes utmost pleasure in it. His eyes will take greater pleasure in it than in the five colors; his ears will take greater pleasure in it than in the five sounds; his mouth will take greater pleasure in it than in the five flavors; and his mind will benefit more from it than from possession of the world.<sup>6</sup> Therefore he cannot be subverted by power or profit, nor swayed by the masses and multitudes, nor unsettled by the whole world. He follows this in life; he follows it in death — this is what is called holding firm to inner power. He who holds firm to inner power is able to order himself; being able to order himself, he can then respond to others. He who is able to order himself and respond to others is called the complete man. Heaven manifests itself in its brightness; earth manifests itself in its breadth; the noble person values his completeness.

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<sup>6</sup> John Knoblock reads this, alternatively, to mean, "his mind benefits from possessing all that is in the world." (*Xunzi*, vol. 1, p. 142).