

**SELECTION FROM THE XUNZI: "A DISCUSSION OF RITES"**

**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:*  
**"A Discussion of Rites"**

What is the origin of rites? I reply, human beings are born with desires, and when they do not achieve their desires, they cannot but seek the means to do so. If their seeking knows no limit or degree, they cannot but contend with one another. With contention comes chaos, and with chaos comes exhaustion. The ancient kings hated chaos, and therefore established rites and rightness in order to limit it, to nurture people's desires, and to give them a means of satisfaction. They saw to it that desires did not exhaust material things and that material things did not fall short of desires. Thus both desires and things were supported and satisfied, and this was the origin of the rites. ....

**Questions:**

1. How does this passage compare to the passage that illustrates Xunzi's outlook on human nature? Do the thoughts expressed here confirm or complicate the impressions that you might receive from Xunzi's comments to the effect that "human nature is evil"?
2. What does Xunzi think of human desires? Why? How does his thinking compare with that of Confucius? With the thinking of other world religions and/or philosophies?
3. In what way does Xunzi's understanding of the rites confirm or differ from the understanding that you see in Confucius' *Analects*?
4. What are the respective roles and nature of rulers and common folk as seen in this passage?

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5. Compare Xunzi's account of the origin and purposes of rites with accounts of the origins and purposes of law in ancient Middle Eastern societies. What similarities and/or differences do you see?

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Rites have three roots. Heaven and Earth are the root of life, the ancestors are the root of the human species, and rulers and teachers are the root of order. If there were no Heaven and Earth, how could there be life? If there were no ancestors, how could there be begetting? If there were no rulers and teachers, how could there be order? If even one of these were lacking, human beings would have no peace. Thus rites serve Heaven above and Earth below; they honor ancestors; they exalt rulers and teachers. These are the three roots of rites. ...

Rites always begin in coarseness, are completed in forms, and end in joy. Thus in their most perfected state both emotion and the forms are fully realized; in the next state, emotions and forms prevail by turns; and in the lowest state, everything returns to emotion and reverts to a great unity.

Heaven and Earth find harmony,  
The sun and moon become bright,  
The four seasons follow in order,  
The stars and constellations move,  
The rivers and streams flow,  
And all things flourish.  
Likes and dislikes are regulated;  
Joys and hates are made appropriate.

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Those below are compliant; those above are enlightened; the myriad things change but do not become chaotic. One who turns his back upon rites will be lost. Are rites not perfect? When they have been properly established and brought to the ultimate point, no one in the world can add to or subtract from them. Root and branch are put in proper order; beginning and end are correlated; distinctions are expressed through the most elegant forms; explanations derive from the utmost discernment. Those in the world who follow the rites will be orderly; those who do not follow them will be chaotic. Those who follow them will be at peace; those who do not follow them will be in danger. Those who follow them will be preserved; those who turn against them will perish. This is something that the lesser person cannot comprehend.

The principle of the rites is truly deep. Discriminations of hard and white, same and different,<sup>1</sup> enter there and drown. The principle of the rites is truly great. Crass and vulgar theories on wielding authority and exerting control enter there and perish. The principle of the rites is truly lofty. Contumelious arrogance, haughty disdain, and the contempt for common customs that presumes one's own superiority to ordinary people<sup>2</sup> enter there and are brought low. ...

Rites are most strict in the ordering of birth and death. Birth is the beginning of a human being; death is his end. When both beginning and end are good, the human way is complete. Therefore the noble person is reverential toward the beginning and watchful over the end, so that beginning and end are as one. This is the way of the noble person; this is the refinement of rites and rightness. To be generous in the treatment of the living but miserly in the treatment of the dead is to show reverence for a being who has consciousness and contempt for one who lacks consciousness. This is the way of an evil person and an offense against the heart. The noble person would be ashamed to treat a bondservant in a way that offends the heart; how much more ashamed would he be to treat those whom he honors and loves in such a way!

Because the rites of the dead can be performed only once for each individual, and never again, they provide the final occasion at which the subject may express the utmost respect for his ruler, and the son may express the utmost respect for his parents. Therefore to serve the living without loyalty and generosity, or without reverence and good form, is called rudeness, and to send off the dead without loyalty and generosity, or without reverence and good form, is called miserliness. The noble person disdains rudeness and is ashamed of miserliness. ...

Rites contract what is too long and expand what is too short, reducing excesses and repairing deficiencies, pervading the forms of love and reverence and enlivening the beauties of right conduct. Therefore, while refined beauty and coarse ugliness, joyful music and mournful weeping, calm contentment and anxious grief are opposites, rites bring them together and make use of them, eliciting and employing each in due course. Therefore, refined beauty, joyful

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<sup>1</sup> Referring to the Mohist logicians and to the dialecticians such as Hui Shi and Gongsun Long.

<sup>2</sup> Possibly referring to the followers of Prince Mou of Wei, a contemporary of Xunzi known for his hedonism.

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music, and calm contentment serve to induce an attitude of tranquility and are employed on auspicious occasions. Coarse ugliness, mournful weeping, and anxious grief induce an attitude of inquietude and are employed on inauspicious occasions. Therefore when refined beauty is utilized, it should never reach the point of shallowness or sensuality, and when coarse ugliness is utilized, it should never lead to the point of starvation or self-abandonment. When joyful music and calm contentment are utilized, they should never lead to profligacy or indolence, and though mournful weeping and anxious grief are utilized, they should never lead to faintheartedness or injury to life. If this is done, then rites will achieve the middle state. ...

It is always true that rites, when they serve the living, are an adornment to joy, and when they serve the dead, an adornment to grief. In sacrifices they are an adornment to reverence, and in military affairs, an adornment to authority. This was the same for the rites of the hundred kings; it is what unites antiquity and the present. The source for this we do not know. ...

Sacrificial rites give expression to the feelings of remembrance and longing for the dead. There inevitably come times when one is overwhelmed by emotions of grief and loss, and a loyal minister or a filial son finds that, even while others are given to the enjoyment of congenial company, these sorrowful emotions arrive. If when they come to him, and he is greatly moved, he nonetheless represses them, his feelings of remembrance and longing will be thwarted and unfulfilled, and his ritual practice will be deficient and incomplete. Therefore the ancient kings established certain forms so that the duty of honoring those who deserve honor and demonstrating affection for those who deserve affection might be fulfilled. Therefore I say that the sacrificial rites give expression to the feelings of remembrance and longing. They are the perfection of loyalty, good faith, love, and reverence, and the flourishing of ritual deportment and refined demeanor. Only the sage can understand them. The sage understands them clearly; the man of service and the noble person are content to carry them out; the officials are careful to maintain them; and the hundred names accept them as established custom. The noble person understands them as the human way; the hundred names think of them as matters having to do with spirits.