

## Debating the *Xing* (性): In the Light of *Xing Zi Ming Chu* and *Xunzi*\*

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*Xing* 性 is an important topic of ancient Chinese philosophy. The discovery of unearthed documents has deepened our understanding of *xing*. *Xing Zi Ming Chu* 性自命出 is probably the Guodian manuscript that has generated the most interest among scholars. This article takes *Xing Zi Ming Chu* and *Xunzi* as investigations to explore the significance of *xing* in the Warring States Period in China. This article believes that the *xing* in *Xing Zi Ming Chu* only refers to natural properties, and it is not as specific as *Mencius* and *Xunzi* to indicate whether it is good or bad. The article will first review the background of Guodian manuscript, introduce the basic situation of Confucian documents in Guodian manuscripts. This article will also introduce the meaning of *xing* in *Xing Zi Ming Chu* and *Xunzi*, which is of great value for us to understand the meaning of *xing* in the Warring States Period.

**Keywords:** *Xing Zi Ming Chu*, *Xunzi*, human nature

### Introduction

The debate over whether *xing* 性 (human nature) is good or bad was a core in the minds of traditional Chinese thinkers. *Xing* was shared in common by all people, whereas *Mencius* 孟子 differentiated among human nature of different type of people. In October 1993, archeologists from the Jingzhou Museum excavated a tomb after received news that tomb robbers had disturbed a tomb in a cemetery at the village of Guodian 郭店, near Jingmen 荊門, Hubei Province 湖北省 (Jingmen Shi Bowuguan, 1997). In addition of the content of *Laozi* 老子, the Guodian Tomb has provided us with some Confucian texts, like *Ziyi* 緇衣 (black jacker) and *Wuxing* 五行 (five phases). The *Xing Zi Ming Chu* 性自命出 (inner nature comes from the mandate; hereafter cited as *XZMC*), one of the text from the cache of Guodian bamboo slips, has attracted the attention and research from historians of Chinese philosophy. In this paper, the author will point out the meaning of *xing* in the *XZMC*, consider that *xing* is close to nature and it holds that man's human nature is neither good nor evil. The article believes that this unearthed manuscript does not systematically discuss *xing*, like *Mencius* and *Xunzi* 荀子, but it is great value for us to understand the significance of *xing* during the Warring States Period.

### The Confucian Texts From Guodian

Before starting the discussion, it is necessary to introduce Guodian's manuscripts on Confucianism. As we know the contents of the Guodian bamboo slips can be divided into three main categories. The first category

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consists of the Daoist *Laozi*.<sup>1</sup> The second category is composed of Confucian works, which can be divided into two groups. The first consists of six texts: *Ziyi*, *Wuxing*, *Cheng Zhi Wen Zhi* 成之聞之 (completing it and hearing it), *Zun De Yi* 尊德義 (honoring virtue and morality), *XZMC*, and *Liude* 六德 (the six forms of virtue). The second group contains two texts: *Lu Mu Gong Wen Zisi* 魯穆公問子思 (Duke Mu of Lu asked Zisi) and *Qiong Da yi Shi* 窮達以時 (failure and success depend on timing). This leaves only the *Zhong Xin Zhi Dao* 忠信之道 (the way of loyalty and fidelity) and 唐虞之道 (the way of Tang [i.e., Yao 堯] and Yu [i.e., Shun 舜]), which, although maintaining a Confucian tone, are specifically concerned with abdication, and as Li Xueqin (2000) suspected they are related to the ideas of “vertical and horizontal strategists 縱橫家” (p. 107). Since the archeological period of the Guodian Tombs are clear,<sup>2</sup> we can compare the dates of the leading Confucian teachers from Confucius onwards.

Confucius 孔子	551-479 BC
Zengzi 曾子	505-436 BC
Zisi 子思	483-402 BC
Zisheng 子上 (Zisi's son)	429-383 BC
Mencius 孟子	390-305 BC
Xunzi 荀子	340-245 BC

Thus, we can conclude that Guodian Tomb dates to the period when Mencius was an old man, and the tomb's works are the texts that Mencius could have read. These materials can be regarded as Confucian dogmatical materials around 300 BC. They are closer to the *Xunzi* than to any other text (Li, 1999).

It is important to take note of these connections with *Xunzi*, in view of the emerging trend to associate the Guodian manuscripts with Zisi 子思 (Li, 1999). Han Fei 韓非 once said that after the death of Confucius, Confucianism was divided into eight schools. In fact, there is no way to have so many schools, not impossible to have eight schools. Confucius advocated benevolence 仁; at the time of Confucius, he never raised this big question of why people can be benevolent, nor could it be raised. After the death of Confucius, his students gradually divided into two paths in exploring this issue: One is to seek outward, and the other is to pursue inward. Whose seek outward believed it is related to cosmology. And on the basis of “The reciprocal process of yin and yang is called the Dao. That which allows the Dao to continue to operate is human goodness [shan], and that which allows it to bring things to completion is human nature” (yiyin yiyang zhi wei dao, ji zhi zhe xing ye, cheng zhi zhe shan ye 一陰一陽之謂道，繼之者性也，成之者善也), believed that human beings have a cosmological relationship. Seeking inward to chase the nature, “Everyone has the feeling of concern for the well-being of others” (ceyin zhi cin, ren jie you zhi 惻隱之心，人皆有之), it is believed that people's ability and benevolence are based on the theory of *Xin* (heart-mind).<sup>3</sup> One evolved into Xunxue 荀學; the other school evolved into Mencian (Pang, 1998). It is clear that Guodian Confucian texts contain a number of core ideas that distinguish them clearly from Mencian, and suggest the existence of a vibrant non-Mencian tradition of Confucianism that culminated in *Xunzi*'s system of moral philosophy (Goldin, 2000).

The discovery of Guodian manuscripts brought a new perspective. Among them, several important themes of *Xunzi*'s philosophy are particularly obvious. The notion of “human nature”, including the controversy over

<sup>1</sup> Bundles A, B, and C; the C bundle includes in *Tai Yi Sheng Shui* 太一生水 (the ultimate one gives birth to water).

<sup>2</sup> Cannot be later than 300 BC. Of course, the bamboo slips would have been written down somewhat earlier.

<sup>3</sup> It is generally agreed that, early Chinese thinkers used the term *xin* 心, literally heart, to encapsulate both the affective and cognitive dimensions.

whether the source of morality is “internal” or “external”, is the key subject that scholars would love to address.

### Human *Xing* in *XZMC* and *Xunzi*

Graham suggested: *Xing* is one of the few in Chinese philosophical terminology which has a very close English equivalent. It is commonly translated “nature”, and a Chinese thinker does in fact discuss the *xing* of a man, of a horse, of water, in very much the same contexts in which we would talk of its nature (Graham, 1967, p. 251; 1986, p. 7). The author believes Graham’s interpretation is classic enough to study the concept of the word. *Xing* is a key idea to understanding the text of the *XZMC*.<sup>4</sup> It is closely related to the inborn nature, growth and derived from *sheng* 生.<sup>5</sup> Mencius believed that human beings share certain inherent moral inclinations. *Xing* tends toward “good”. He concluded that man is originally born good and badness in man is a result of external influences. It represents the natural course of development that an organism may be expected to undergo given nourishing conditions (Godin, 1999). *Xunzi*, on the other hand, believed that *xing* means “what is so by birth” (*sheng zhi suoyi ran zhe* 生之所以然者) (Wang, 1988)<sup>6</sup> and that man’s nature is inherent from birth. *Xunzi* did not say that *xing* explains the process of being born (Allan, 1997).<sup>7</sup> Rather, *sheng* must be growth and *Xunzi* said that a thing’s *xing* explains why it grows the way it does. *Xing* is linked to a sort of naturalness. It enables spontaneous and effortless action (Graham, 1967; 1986). The consequence of this difference in usage, as Dai Zhen (1982) pointed out, is that *Xunzi* uses *xing* to denote the characteristic that all members of a species have in common, whereas Mencius uses the term to denote the characteristic that distinguishes a species from all others.

Before starting the discussion of *XZMC*, the author wants to conclude the semantic relations between *xing* and *sheng*. *Xing* relates directly to natural development and as *Xunzi* said, it explains why a thing *sheng* as it does. *Sheng* is just that sort of growth or development that occurs when a thing accords with its *xing* (Robins, 2011). To harm a living thing’s *xing* is to harm its *sheng*. The word *xing* was not graphically distinguished from the word *sheng* in the Warring States.

In the following passage, we can see the concept of *xing* in the *XZMC*:

牛生而長，雁生而伸，其性使然，人而學或使之也。凡物無不異也者，剛之柱也，剛取之也。柔之約 [也]，柔取之也。

An ox is born and grows large, a wild goose is born and stretches upward; their nature makes them so. But (?) learning may (also) make them so. (On this,) there is no difference among things in general. Hard things’ standing upright is explained by (elements contributing to) hardness’s laying hold of them. The bending of that is soft is explained by (elements contributing to) softness’s laying hold of them.

An ox’s *xing* is what contributes to its life (*sheng*) and growth. Moreover, an ox’s *xing* is what makes an ox different from a wild goose. Its *xing* is its inborn biological predisposed distinctiveness. *Xing* denotes an instinctive characteristic of all things. The concept of *xing* in the *XZMC*, refers not just an inborn quality like *Xunzi*, but includes what Mencius refers to as natural characteristic tendencies. It is quite clear that the concept

<sup>4</sup> *Xing* also serves as the title of the other version of the text contained in the bamboo manuscripts of the Shanghai Museum Collections, the *Xing Qing Lun* 性情論 (treatise on nature and sentiment).

<sup>5</sup> *Sheng* attracts a host of translations, among them “life,” “growth,” “generation,” and their verbal variants.

<sup>6</sup> The grammar of the noun phrase is unambiguous; it refers to whatever explains why *sheng* 生 is as it is. To refer to what is so by birth, *Xunzi* would have had to write something more like “所生而然者”.

<sup>7</sup> *Sheng* was understood in early China on the model of the life-cycle of plants, and therefore is never a precise equivalent of birth.

of *XZMC* supports *xing* includes the course of development when it states 其性 (使然) (the *xing* has caused and contributed to the growth and development of the ox and the wild goose as shown in their characteristic tendencies).<sup>8</sup>

The *XZMC* also suggests that *xing* only partly explains how things come into being. The essential nature of human beings does not automatically complete the process of development. The process of “being” and “becoming” is also the result of actual learning and practice (*xue* 學) as the passage quoted. *Xing* and *Xue* are two separate and complementary components of a whole: “their nature makes them so. But (?) learning may (also) make them so”. That is to say, grow large and/or stretch upwards. *Xue* itself is as important as, if not more important than, *xing* in the process of the effective development of an individual (Chan, 2009).

*XZMC*’s author did not pursue the discussion of whether human *xing* is good or bad:

凡人雖有性，心亡定志，待物而後作，待悅而後行，待習而後定。喜怒哀悲之俘，性也。及其見於外，則物取之也。性自命出，命從天降。道始於情，情生於性。

While all human beings possess *xing*, their *xin* lack a fixed intention. It depends on things to become active; it depends on pleasure to become functioning; it depends on practice to become fixed. The *qi* of happiness, anger, grief, and sorrow is (called) none other than nature. When it (the *qi*) appears on the outside, it is because (external) things have laid hold of it. Human nature derives from the Mandate; the Mandate descends from Heaven. The *dao* begins in *qing*;<sup>9</sup> *qing* is derived from *xing*.

If we follow the ox and wild goose picture, human *xing* in *XZMC* should refer to inborn nature and developing characteristic tendencies that contribute to the growth or life process of human beings and to their distinctive attributes. These could be the desires aroused through the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and body. One can see that a dynamic connotation like this leaves room for such subsequent debate as that between Mencius and Xunzi (Chan, 2009). Also, it is the heart, not *xing* or *qing*, decides how we act. The feelings produced by the *xing* nonetheless influence it, because it will only choose directions that are pleasing (Perkins, 2009).<sup>10</sup> How the heart proceeds, depend as much on the things it encounters as on *xing*.

*XZMC* consistently use *xing* in the same sense as *Xunzi*:

四海之內其性一也。其用心各異，教使然也。

Within the four seas, [everyone’s] *xing* is the same. That they use their minds differently is caused by teaching.

This statement implies that the most significant encounters with things take the form of education and we can compare this to *Xunzi*, “*Quanxue*” 勸學:

干、越、夷、貉之子，生而同聲，長而異俗，教使之然也。

The children of Gan, Yue, Yi, and Mo all make the same sounds when born, but grow up to have different customs; teaching makes this so.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> It’s worth noting that this notion of *xing* also appears in such early texts as the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 and *Guoyu* 國語.

<sup>9</sup> Some scholars translate *qing* as “reality response”. See Hansen (1992, p. 405, n. 14; 1995, pp. 181-211).

<sup>10</sup> A later statement in the *XZMC* says that “although they have *xing*, if the heart does not take hold of it, it does not emerge (sui you xing, xin fu qu bu chu 雖有性，心弗取不出)”. This means that the heart can control how it feels, but this control is obviously not absolute.

<sup>11</sup> This idea probably goes back to *Analects* 論語: “[People’s] *xing* are close to one another; practice makes them distant from one another (*xing xiang jin ye, xi xiang yuan ye* 性相近也，習相遠也)”.

In the *XZMC*, it is not our *xing* to act in any particular way, because only after our minds gain a stable determination or direction, we will have a particular way of doing things, and it does that as the result of education. This process obviously makes us the *xing* of the person remains unchanged (Robins, 2011). *XZMC* does not state explicitly that human *xing* is evil.<sup>12</sup> The phrase *haowu, xing ye* 好惡，性也 in *XZMC*, might at first glance be translated as “love of evil is *xing*”; but it is clear from the next clause—*suohao suowu, wu ye* 所好所惡，物也 (“what are liked or disliked are objects”)—that *haowu* must mean “liking and disliking” here (Chen, 1999). The *XZMC* also considers *xing* to be neutral and does not have a value judgment orientation. *XZMC*’s “goodness” 善 and “badness” 不善 are different from Mencius’s “good and evil” 善與惡. “Goodness” and “badness” are not the nouns for judgment orientation but used as the verbs mean the emotional reactions “liking and disliking” (Chih, 2002, p. 29). It is evident that they regularly understand the *xing* to be naturally deficient of “morality” 義, which must be attained from “outside” 外. The conception of *xing* in *XZMC* could hardly come closer to that of *Xunzi*. *XZMC* explains that our inborn nature is revealed spontaneously in our responses to the stimuli around us, and that it is not naturally moral (Goldin, 2000).

All humans share the same inborn *xing* (四海之內其性一也). Our *xing* is affected by many factors, namely external things, internal feelings, environment and social habits:

凡性，或動之，或逆之，<sup>13</sup>或節之，或礪之，或出之，或養之，或長之。

Generally, *xing* can be activated, received, restrained, polished and disciplined, evoked, nourished, or extended.

Mencian moral philosophy comes close to the *XZMC* view on certain points. If we interpret such passages in *Mencius*, *xing* is the source of our virtues, but *xing* cannot function or develop in any particular way.<sup>14</sup> Being ethical requires us to develop these sensitivities in some way, such as the following passage in *Mencius*:

公都子問曰：鈞是人也、或爲大人、或爲小人、何也。孟子曰：從其大體爲大人，從其小體爲小人。曰：鈞是人也，或從其大體，或從其小體，何也。曰：耳目之官不思，而蔽於物物交物，則引之而已矣。心之官則思、思則得之，不思則不得也。此天之所與我者，先立乎其大者，則其小者不能奪也。此爲大人而已矣。

Gongdu Zi said, “If all men are equal, how is it that there are greater and lesser men?” Mencius said, “Some follow their greater part and some follow their lesser part.” “Why do some follow their greater part and some follow their lesser part?” Mencius said, “The organs such as the eye and ear cannot discriminate and are thus confused by things. Things are interconnected with other things, which lead one further away. The function of the mind is to discriminate—if you discriminate you will attain it. If you don’t discriminate, you won’t attain it. These are what Heaven has bestowed upon us. If you first establish yourself in the greater part, then the small part cannot be snatched away from you. This is the essential of being a great man.”

Mencius seems to have surpassed anything in the *XZMC*. The idea is that if we cultivate ourselves in the best way, it will become our *xing* to be virtuous people. This idea was implicit in the verbal use of *xing* in this passage in *Mencius*:

<sup>12</sup> Another Guodian manuscript, *Cheng Zhi Wen Zhi*, says: “The *xing* of a Sage and the *xing* of a mediocre person are without exception regulated by Heaven at birth; thus, they are as they are... Therefore, the people all have *xing*, and a Sage cannot be without one (shengren zhi xing yu zhongren zhi xing, qi sheng er wei you fei zhi jie yu tian ye, ze you shi ye...ci yi min jie you xing er shengren bu ke mo ye 聖人之性與中人之性，其生而未有非之節於天也，則猶是也……此以民皆有性而聖人不可莫也)”. Compare *Xunzi* “xing’e” 性惡: “That by which the Sage is the same as the populace, and is not different from the populace, is his *xing* (gu shengren zhi suoyi tong yu zhong, qi bu yi yu zhong zhe, xing ye 故聖人之所以同於眾，其不異於眾者，性也)”. Not only *XZMC*, none of the Guodian manuscripts state explicitly *xing* is evil.

<sup>13</sup> 逆 is also read as 逢. See Jingmen Shi Bowuguan 荊門市博物館 (1998, p. 179).

<sup>14</sup> See *Mencius*, “Lianghuiwang Shang” 梁惠王上 and “Gongsunchou Shang” 公孫丑上.

盡其心者，知其性也。知其性，則知天矣。存其心，養其性，所以事天也。

Those who make full use of their hearts will understand their *xing*. If they understand their *xing* they will understand *tian*. Preserving one's heart and nourishing one's *xing* is how to serve *tian*.

The ideal here is those who can cultivate virtue on their own without being disturbed. Therefore, his virtue and *tian* are continuous with spontaneous operations.

### Conclusion

*XZMC* provides an account of how *xing* were viewed before Mencius' era. Using the concept of *xing* in *XZMC*, we can reexam the debate over whether *xing* is good or bad, and the importance of learning and habitual practice (Goldin, 2000). In the *XZMC*, we find the concept of *xing* enables us to elicit the basic distinction between human and other animals (exemplified by the ox and the wild goose) in terms of the inborn and developing potentiality and capability to become morally competent (Chan, 2009). *Xing* refers to what is inborn in an organism, and thus to the features that all members of a certain species hold in common rather than the features that distinguish a certain species from all other species (Goldin, 2000).

The view of *xing* highlights a difference between *Xunzi* and the *XZMC*. The latter may discuss various ideas, such as *xing* and learning are also fundamental to *Xunzi*. But in this earlier manuscript, *XZMC* has not yet formed an integral system. *XZMC* is compiled into Confucian category, but it is not apodictically interrelated to *Mencius* or *Xunzi* (Scarpari, 2001; Tao, 2002).<sup>15</sup> The discussion about *xing* in *XZMC* is obviously different from *Mencius* and *Xunzi*. In fact, the influence of *XZMC* is enough for later philosophers, such as *Xunzi* to bring the discussion of *xing* to another stage.

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<sup>15</sup> It is noteworthy that Gaozi 告子 considers *xing* to be neutral, and there is no such thing as good and evil. This is the same as the example of the ox and grows in the *XZMC*. But the focus of this article is on *Xunzi*, this article will not discuss it. For the relationship between Gaozi and the *XZMC*, see Scarpari (2001, pp. 275-287) and Tao (2002, pp. 169-177).

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