

Shifts in Xunzi's Status as Reflected in the Stele Inscription of the Five Sages Hall

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Abstract: In the fifth year of the Jingyou era of the Northern Song Dynasty (1038 CE), Kong Daofu constructed the Five Sages Hall (Wuxian Tang) within the Confucius Temple in Qufu. This hall enshrined Mencius, Xunzi, Yang Xiong, Wang Tong, and Han Yu, with an accompanying stele inscription extolling their role in transmitting and promoting Confucian learning. This initiative aimed to reconstruct the Confucian orthodoxy (daotong) in response to the challenges posed by Buddhism and Daoism. Xunzi's status underwent significant shifts: esteemed during the Han and Tang dynasties for his role in transmitting the classics and his alignment with the needs of imperial unification, his standing progressively declined during the Song dynasty due to Neo-Confucian critiques of his theory of innate evil. The Five Sages Hall exemplifies the inclusivity of early Song Confucianism, while the fluctuation in Xunzi's status reflects broader shifts within Confucian thought driven by the evolving demands of different historical periods.

Keywords: Stele Inscription of the Five Sages Hall (Wuxian Tang Ji Bei); Confucian Orthodoxy (Daotong); Xunzi

1. Introduction

In 1038 (the fifth year of Jingyou reign in the Northern Song Dynasty), Kong Daofu oversaw the construction of Wuxian Hall on the western side of Qufu Confucius Temple, where he simultaneously erected a stele to honor five ancient sages: Mencius, Xunzi, Yang Xiong, Wang Tong, and Han Yu. The establishment of this hall not only reflected the gradual decline of Xunzi's influence during the Tang-Song transition period but also highlighted the political ideals and practical efforts of Confucian scholars in reconstructing the orthodox Confucian tradition.

2. The Inscription of Wuxian Hall and the Tradition of Wuxian

During the Jingyou era (1034–1038), Kong Daofu served as Prefect of Yanzhou. Confronting the erosion of Confucian influence by Buddhist and Taoist forces, he advocated “expanding the great teachings and reviving this literary tradition” [1], with the core mission being to reconstruct the Confucian-Taoist lineage to counter challenges from Buddhist and Taoist philosophies. The establishment of Wuxian Hall exemplified this mission—By venerating five sages—Mencius, Xunzi, Yang Xiong, Wang Tong, and Han Yu—the hall established a new Confucian-Taoist order. Within this system: Mencius symbolized rejection of heterodox ideas; Xunzi represented the classical scholarship tradition from the Warring States period through the Han and Tang dynasties; Yang Xiong embodied steadfast adherence to Confucianism amidst adversity; Wang Tong bridged the

evolution of Confucian thought; while Han Yu demonstrated resolute resistance against Buddhist ideologies.

The Five Virtuous Scholars Hall, originally constructed by Kong Daofu, stood before the Duke of Qi's Hall on the western route of the Confucian Temple. Its subsequent destruction dates to an unknown period. Today, the surviving stele commemorating the hall is located west of Jin Si Tang (Golden Silk Hall) along the temple's western path. This monumental monument measures 320 cm in height and 115 cm in width, featuring 16 inscribed lines each containing approximately 44 characters. Authored and personally calligraphed by Kong Daofu, the stele highlights the scholars' pivotal role in preserving and advancing Confucian teachings while underscoring their enduring legacy.

During the Tang Dynasty, Han Yu first systematically proposed the Daoist lineage tradition from Yao and Shun to Confucius and Mencius: Yao–Shun–Yu–Tang–Wen, Wu, Duke of Zhou–Confucius–Mencius [2]. In the late Tang period, Pi Rixiu extended this lineage to the Sui and Tang dynasties, proposing a sequence of Confucius–Mencius–Xunzi–Wen Zhongzi–Han Yu [3], which laid the foundation for the Five Sages' Daoist tradition in the Song Dynasty.

Liu Kai, a renowned scholar of the early Song Dynasty, continued Han Yu's philosophical lineage while adding Yang Xiong, Wang Tong, and Han Yu to its tradition. He declared: "My philosophy is rooted in the teachings of Confucius, Mencius, Yang Xiong, and Han Yu; my writings are inspired by their wisdom" [4]. Liu Kai believed that when Confucian principles faced challenges, successive thinkers—Mencius, Yang Xiong, Wang Tong, and Han Yu—emerged to "clarify the teachings of our ancient master Confucius" [4]. In essence, it was these sages who "reinvented Confucius' teachings", enabling his philosophy to flourish throughout history.

Wang Yucheng, the leader of the Song Dynasty literary circle, also held the same view, believing that Mencius, Yang Xiong, Wenzhongzi, Han Changli and other sages could "learn the way of the sage and write the words of the sage" [4].

Sun Fu, the teacher of Mount Tai, formally established the "Five Sages" Dao tradition system. He noted that those who "entered the Confucian path through its gate... were only Mencius, Xunzi, Yang Xiong, Wang Tong, and Han Yu" [5]. Sun Fu's disciple Shi Jie, known as the Culaishi (Master of Cula), argued that Confucius was a sage while Mencius, Xunzi, Yang Xiong, Wang Tong, and Han Yu were virtuous scholars [6]. Undoubtedly, the Five Sages Hall constructed by the Confucian school was directly influenced by the teachings of Sun Fu and Shi Jie.

The Five Sages (Mencius, Xunzi, Yang Xiong, Wang Tong, Han Yu) gained widespread recognition among mainstream intellectuals of their time primarily because their ideas aligned with the goals of the Northern Song Classical Prose Movement. This movement directly challenged the prevailing ornate literary style, traditional Confucian classics, and Buddhist-Laoist philosophies. The Five Sages' propositions in ideology, literature, and spiritual philosophy resonated with these ideals, which explains why they became so influential during that era.

3. Xunzi, from a Scholar of Classics to a Heterodox Believer in the Tao

Xunzi, a renowned Confucian scholar and the most accomplished representative of the Warring States period's school of thought, is often mentioned alongside Confucius and Mencius. However, his historical status has experienced many ups and downs. From his prominence during the Han and Tang dynasties to his decline in the Song Dynasty, the fundamental reason for Xunzi's changing status lies in whether his ideas aligned with the demands of his era.

During the Han and Tang dynasties, Xunzi's "transmission of classics" and his governance model that complemented ritual laws, along with his political propositions advocating both royal authority and hegemony while maintaining "Confucian principles in public discourse and legal frameworks in private practice," aligned with the centralized autocratic demands of a unified empire. This alignment led to his relatively prominent status. By the Song dynasty, however, Xunzi's theory of innate depravity faced comprehensive criticism from Neo-Confucian scholars, who labeled him a heretic within the Daoist tradition, gradually pushing him toward marginalization.

3.1. The Prominence of the Western Han Dynasty

Xunzi's prominence in the Western Han Dynasty primarily stemmed from his pivotal role in preserving Confucian classics. Scholars emphasize that both Zixia and Xunzi were key figures in disseminating Confucian

teachings. After Confucius' death, Zixia established the influential "Xihe School" in the Xihe region through teaching and mentoring. Research indicates Xunzi's philosophical system partially inherited the Xihe School tradition rooted in the Three Jin states (Shanxi, Shanxi, and Shaanxi) represented by Zixia. Notably, Zixia's prominent disciples like Li Kui and Wu Qi belonged to the Legalist school, while Xunzi's renowned followers Han Fei and Li Si similarly became representatives of Legalism. This phenomenon was not accidental but reflected the inherent logic of early Confucian-Legalist ideological integration, demonstrating both the continuity and evolution of intellectual genes within academic transmission.

In his work *General Treatise on Xunzi*, Qing scholar Wang Zhong observed: "Since the passing of the Seventy Masters... it was Xunzi who preserved the transmission of the Six Arts" [7]. The *Records of the Grand Historian: Biography of Mencius and Xunzi* documents that Xunzi authored tens of thousands of words, though his disciples Li Si and Han Fei later embraced Legalism. Scholars like Fuqiu Bo and Zhang Cang continued his teachings, transmitting the *Book of Songs*, *Book of Rites*, and *Spring and Autumn Annals*, establishing them as the mainstream Confucian classics during the Han Dynasty. Liang Qichao thus noted: "After the Han era, while Confucianism was nominally flourishing, only the Xun School truly passed down its teachings" [8]. Xu Fuguan further observed: "In terms of early Western Han intellectual trends, Xunzi's influence surpassed Mencius's" [9]. His research indicates that most Western Han scholars of the New Text School derived their knowledge from Xunzi's disciples: Xunzi personally instructed Mao Heng (known as Great Mao Gong) in the *Three Hundred Poems*, who later passed it to Mao Chang (known as Lesser Mao Gong), marking the foundation of the Mao School. Simultaneously, Xunzi taught his disciple Fuqiu Bo the *Lu Poetry*, forming a crucial branch of the Han Dynasty's New Text School transmission system. The *Guliang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals* was first transmitted by Xunzi to Fuqiu Bo, then to Shen Gong, who passed it to Jiang Gong, and later to posterity. The *Zuo Commentary* evolved through Xunzi's teachings to Zhang Cang, who in turn passed it to Jia Yi. The academic lineage of Confucian classics studied by Han scholars can almost all be traced back to Xunzi and his school's dissemination efforts. Xunzi's school's systematic organization and transmission of canonical texts demonstrated its historical influence, solidifying Xunzi's preeminence over Mencius in Han academic discourse. The preface to the "Chronicle of the Twelve Feudal Lords" in *Records of the Grand Historian* states: "Scholars like Xunzi, Mencius, Gongsun Gu, and Han Fei each compiled excerpts from The Spring and Autumn Annals to write their works, too numerous to list" [10]. Sima Qian's placement of Xunzi before Mencius further confirms that during the Western Han Dynasty, Xunzi's status surpassed that of Mencius.

3.2. The Decline from the Eastern Han to the Tang Dynasty

During the Eastern Han Dynasty, Mencius' influence gradually expanded, with multiple commentaries on his works emerging, represented by Zhao Qi's annotations. In terms of status, Xunzi and Mencius were long regarded as equals: The "Book of Han: Table of Ancient and Modern Figures" listed them as second-tier "superior middle-rank benevolent scholars"; Wang Chong's *Lunheng* further noted that "from the Confucian-Mohist faction at the top to the Xun-Mencius school at the bottom, all scholars produced enduring texts through their teachings" [11].

Tang Dynasty scholar Linghu Defen observed: "Confucius, Mozi, Xunzi, and Mencius were endowed with the wisdom of sages, promoting orthodox principles to uplift their societies" [12]. Here, Linghu Defen not only grouped Xun and Mencius together but placed Xun before Mencius. Moreover, consistent with the *Lunheng* (Discourses on Weighing), he included Mozi among the sages. This demonstrates that during the Han and Tang dynasties, Confucianism and Mohism were not perceived as irreconcilable rivals.

In his preface to Yang Jing's commentary on Xunzi, the author extols the philosopher as "a master of philosophical discourse who articulates profound principles through historical analysis, bridging ancient wisdom with contemporary relevance. His ability to resolve social chaos and establish rational frameworks effortlessly demonstrates his status as a true intellectual paragon and mentor to rulers". The text further notes that "the Duke of Zhou established foundational principles, Confucius inherited them as his philosophical forebear, while Xunzi and Mencius further developed these ideas" [13], forming an academic paradigm of "Xun-Meng complementarity" that reveals the continuous lineage of thought from the Duke of Zhou, Confucius, Mencius, to Xunzi.

During the late Tang Dynasty, Pi Rixiu confronted a chaotic social reality. He attributed this to the erosion of Confucian traditions and advocated reviving the sage's teachings through "transforming people with Dao" to address societal ills. To revive Confucianism, Pi Rixiu honored Mencius while promoting his philosophy of countering Yang and Mo's doctrines to reaffirm Confucian authority. Simultaneously, he endorsed Wang Tong of the Wenzhong School and Xunzi, fully endorsing Xunzi's pragmatic approach to statecraft that aimed to benefit society and rectify social ills.

3.3. *The Song Dynasty Was in Decline*

In reality, the status evolution of Mencius and Xunzi maintained relative equilibrium before the Song Dynasty. Even during the early Northern Song period, Mencius' prominence was limited to minor distinctions in the Confucian Temple's sacrificial hierarchy—It wasn't until 1084 (the seventh year of Emperor Shenzong's Yuanfeng era) that Xunzi was posthumously enfeoffed as Lord Lanling and formally included in the Confucian Temple's sacrificial sequence. Meanwhile, Mencius had already been enfeoffed as Duke of Zou in 1074 (the seventh year of the Xining era) and attained the prestigious status of "co-sacrificial companion to King Wenxuan" in 1083 (the sixth year of Yuanfeng) [4]. The traditional ritual concept that "major state affairs lie in sacrifice and warfare" served as a crucial criterion for scholars to evaluate Confucianists' standing. Although their sacrificial periods were relatively close, the significant differences in ritual hierarchy revealed a striking contrast: Mencius' central role as the primary sacrificial figure and Xunzi's secondary position. This reflects the academic landscape of the early Northern Song period—where Mencius' philosophy gradually gained dominance but had not yet established absolute supremacy.

3.4. *The Reason for the Change of Xunzi's Position*

The evolution of Xunzi's status during specific historical periods fundamentally resulted from the deep integration of his philosophical system with the developmental needs of his era. Although both Mencius and Xunzi were prominent Confucian thinkers, their historical contexts differed significantly—Mencius lived during the mid-Warring States period, while Xunzi emerged in the late Warring States era. This temporal divergence led them to address distinct historical challenges: Mencius focused on practical approaches for internal state governance, whereas Xunzi shifted his theoretical emphasis toward harmonizing Confucian core values with the emerging political framework of a unified empire.

During the Warring States period, as the Zhou Dynasty's decline intensified and new social classes emerged, Chinese society underwent a pivotal transition from feudalism to centralized autocratic monarchy. Mencius' political theories failed to gain widespread acceptance from rulers at the time, even being dismissed as "pedantic and impractical". In stark contrast, Xunzi astutely recognized these social transformations, innovatively integrating Confucian ethical values with Legalist political practices. Within his theoretical framework emphasizing ritual propriety and legal governance, Xunzi incorporated elements of rule of law into the ritual system, creating a complementary governance model that harmonized rites and laws. As Liang Qichao noted, influenced by late Warring States Legalist developments, the "rites" advocated by Xunzi essentially shared many characteristics with the Legalist "laws" in their fundamental nature.

This theoretical innovation, which combines practical relevance with forward-looking vision, endows Xunzi's philosophy with greater practical value. His political propositions of "combining ritual and law" and "balancing royal authority with hegemonic power," along with the principle of "promoting Confucianism while implementing Legalist principles," not only effectively met the demands of social transformation during the late Warring States period but also provided crucial theoretical support for the establishment of a centralized unified state. This demonstrates that the rise of Xunzi's philosophy was no accident, but rather an inevitable outcome of its ideological system aligning with the needs of social transition.

The rise of Neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty fundamentally altered the historical trajectory of Xunzi's philosophy. When Kong Daoфу established the Hall of Five Sages during the early Song period, Xunzi was still enshrined in the sacrificial system, with inscriptions praising his "management of celestial phenomena and establishment of human principles", affirming the shaping influence of his ritual and legal ideas on Han-

Tang institutions. However, this inclusiveness proved ephemeral. Following the failure of the Qingli Reforms, Neo-Confucianism gradually dominated discourse. The key reason for Xunzi's demotion from the Confucian Temple can be traced to the Ming scholars' fundamental rejection of his "view that human nature is evil and rituals are artificial". Neo-Confucianists like the Cheng brothers (Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi) and Zhu Xi held a comprehensive critique of Xunzi's teachings. The Cheng brothers criticized Xunzi's "extreme bias, where the single phrase 'human nature is evil' undermines his core principles" [14], while Zhu Xi bluntly labeled him as "entirely inheriting Shen Buhai's philosophy" [15], categorizing him under the Legalist lineage. This doctrinal critique based on Confucian orthodoxy severely undermined Xunzi's legitimacy. From then on, Xunzi transformed from a "great Confucian scholar" to a "heretical heterodox," his image solidified as a traitorous Confucianist aligned with Legalism. Thus, Xunzi's core proposition of "human nature is evil" became seen as an alien element within the Confucian tradition. In this context, Xunzi's philosophy and Mencius' doctrine exhibited a clear seesaw relationship—The Neo-Confucians' "veneration of Mencius' "theory of innate goodness" inevitably came with comprehensive criticism of Xunzi's teachings. From a logical perspective, the dichotomy between "human nature is evil" and "innate goodness" constitutes a typical contradictory proposition. According to the law of non-contradiction, affirming one proposition necessarily negates the other. This dualistic structure became the ideological foundation for Neo-Confucians' suppression of Xunzi and veneration of Mencius. Meanwhile, Wang Anshi's "New Learning" reformed the imperial examination system by incorporating *Mencius* into the official examination framework, cementing its status as a required classical text. This development significantly reduced the influence of Xunzi's philosophy. Under the combined impact of Neo-Confucianism and the imperial examination system, Xunzi and his doctrines gradually became marginalized within the Confucian tradition after the Song Dynasty, ultimately establishing a long-term pattern where Mencius' teachings dominated while Xunzi's ideas declined.

4. Conclusion

The Five Sages Hall stele, which honors both Mencius and Xunzi, exemplifies the inclusive spirit of Confucian revival during the Song Dynasty. The flourishing of the Five Sages' philosophical tradition in the mid-to-late Song period reflected Confucian scholars' counterattack against the dominance of Buddhist and Taoist philosophies. The status of Xunzi and Mencius shifted in a seesaw pattern: while Mencius maintained prominence through the Song and Ming dynasties, Xunzi faced complete rejection by Neo-Confucianism. This prolonged decline reveals the evolution of Confucian thought under the influence of Neo-Confucianism.

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