

Xunzi's Testimonies

We begin our consideration of the Guodian manuscripts by turning to Xunzi 荀子, the Confucian thinker who was active in the second half of the fourth century and the first half of the third century BCE.¹ This is about three generations after Zisi, whose dates are equally uncertain, though we know that as the grandson of Confucius, he was a contemporary of Lord Mu (Mugong 穆公), who ruled the state of Lu 魯 from 415 to 383 BCE. Even earlier, of course, is Confucius himself, whose dates as given in his biography in the *Grand Scribe's Records* (*Shiji* 史記) are from 551 to 479 BCE.

Coming close to the end of the Warring States period (481–221 BCE), Xunzi was one of the leading intellectual figures of his time, someone who was knowledgeable about history, the ritual institutions, the classics, and all the major intellectual positions of his rivals. In “Contra Twelve Masters” (*Fei shierzi* 非十二子) he reprimanded several influential thinkers. In “Human Nature Is Bad” (*Xing e* 性惡) he singled out for criticism his predecessor Mencius and articulated his own take on what was by now a topic of some controversy. Both of these essays are found in the collection of writings identified by his name, which includes not only his own writings but also those attributed to him, and even works that were regarded as important within the scholarly tradition associated with him.² They are testimonies of contemporary intellectual culture and provide a reference point for our consideration of the Guodian manuscripts.

By the time of Xunzi's writing, there was growing sentiment that the institutions, ideas, and peoples of the Warring States period were simply

unharnessed, divisive, and lacking in authority. They had to be brought together in unity, as one, and Xunzi was a strong voice in this endeavor. While this position anticipated the political unification that took place shortly after Xunzi's time, our emphasis here is on what Xunzi thought about the era that preceded him.

We will begin with "Dispelling Blindness" (*Jie bi* 解蔽), an essay by Xunzi that I believe contains a veiled but unmistakable reference to Zisi. Drawing on the clues supplied by this work, we can turn to two additional essays from Xunzi, "Nothing Indecorous" (*Bugou* 不苟) and the aforementioned "Contra Twelve Masters." The latter names Zisi as one of Xunzi's most disliked figures, and a close reading will reveal why. By comparing all three essays with the Guodian manuscript "Five Conducts," I will show that Xunzi not only was familiar with the teachings contained in that manuscript but in fact identified those teachings as belonging to Zisi. As often happens when we strongly disagree with someone, we invest so much time and energy into challenging that person that we end up absorbing some of the person's views and even their style of thinking. In other words, the orthodoxy that Xunzi sought to establish was sometimes indistinguishable from the heresy that he denounced. As much as he disapproved of Zisi, Xunzi had an intimate knowledge of his ideas and even appropriated some of his diction and literary style. The complex relationship between Xunzi and Zisi will reveal much about the latter figure, confirm his involvement with the Guodian manuscripts, and lay the foundation for the rest of this book.

Before diving in, it is possible to say a few words about the topic of aloneness that we will encounter in many of the texts examined below.³ One formulation in particular is key: 君子慎其獨也 "The gentleman is watchful over himself when alone," as it appears in "Five Conducts" as well as the two essays that give a synoptic overview of Confucian teachings as a whole, "Doctrine of the Mean" (*Zhongyong* 中庸) and "Great Learning" (*Daxue* 大學). Other related expressions include "living in leisure" (*xianju* 閑居 or *xianju* 閒居), "living alone" (*duju* 獨居), and "to spend time in seclusion" (*youchu* 幽處), among others. All of them, invariably, refer to a situation where a person is alone.

On one level, aloneness is simply the condition of being alone, accompanied by no one. Such aloneness can be voluntary, as when I take up residence in a stone cave or go for a walk in the middle of the night, or it can be imposed on me against my will, as when I am forced into exile. Because in a situation like this I have no one else to pay attention to, I can focus on myself in a way that I am unable to do otherwise, noticing even the minutest motion of my mind—as we will see in Xunzi's "Nothing Indecorous." Such an internalist understanding of aloneness leads us to other meanings of the notion. By the end of the chapter, we will consider the situation where I am alone because I have been neglected by others. In such a case, I could be surrounded by people, even by family and friends, but still feel that I have been deprived of companionship internally. For the sources that we are dealing with, a common scenario is when my talents go unrecognized by the ruler and by my colleagues, and I become politically isolated. As a result, I may withdraw from public life, "live at leisure," and perhaps end up in rather straitened circumstances. All of these are also "aloneness" in a more extended sense, and here the injunction "the gentleman is watchful over himself when alone" takes on another layer of meaning: How am I to survive the trials and tribulations of this ordeal and carry on without losing my equanimity?

In terms of the source of the topic of aloneness, as we will see in "Five Conducts" and its commentary, Heaven is posited as the highest authority in the order of things, and it is what looks down at a person in a moment like this. Recognizing this authority, I try to internalize it in order to guard myself against any transgression or impropriety, as if Heaven were watching. We may contrast this with what is often called an out-of-body experience: Here I am not so much stepping outside myself as imagining what would happen if Heaven were inside me, an inward as opposed to outward motion that delves ever deeper into my mind, searching for "the heart of hearts."⁴ Related to this is the notion of Fate, which we encounter in the Guodian text that editors have entitled "Poverty or Success Is a Matter of Timing" (*Qiong da yi shi* 窮達以時). As decreed by Heaven, Fate is what determines what happens to me. Thus, there is only I, and there is Heaven, with no one else to mediate the connection between them. If some misfortune were to befall me, I would not

look to blame anyone, such as my ruler or my colleague. Together, it seems to me that these conceptions represent a kind of traditional worldview that did not necessarily originate with the Guodian texts, or even with Confucius, as with many of the notions mentioned in the Introduction. We find traces of this worldview in the earliest inscriptional records, where the ruler refers to himself as “I, the lone man” (*yu yiren* 余一人), or the sole channel of communication between humans and a higher power.⁵

In the literature contemporary with the Guodian texts, there are two ways in which the topic of aloneness plays out with respect to the ruler. One is the aura of mystery surrounding him: he is alone in his position and acts in a way that sometimes appears inscrutable to others. He might give the impression, for instance, that he is disengaged, perhaps even indifferent to the day-to-day operations of the state; but in fact, behind the scenes, he is pulling all the strings and exerting tight control over his subjects. He could even put his subjects under surveillance, though in the context of the ancient period this was more a system of collective liability where the subjects kept watch over one another. Such a method of control leads to the second aspect of the topic of aloneness as it relates to the ruler, because it is imposed from the top down. Though the sources containing these discussions are generally dated later than the Guodian texts, there is no reason not to trace them to earlier times—power, control, and domination would have been as deeply embedded in this traditional worldview as they continue to be central to our own political reality. Rather than seeing a particular source as earlier than another, a more preferable approach is to see all of them, including the Guodian texts, as being engaged in a debate: As a ruler tries to bring the subject into submission, there is pushback and the effort to keep the ruler's power in check.

Of course, by the time of Mencius, while the authority of Heaven remains unchallenged, there is a considerable shift in emphasis as Heaven is found to be directly rooted in me; it is no longer necessary that I begin on the outside, with this external authority, but instead I discover that I have had it all along. This picture is already emerging in the Guodian texts but is not completed until Mencius. How it came into being will be one of the major storylines of this book.

“Dispelling Blindness”

空石之中有人焉，其名曰殽。其為人也，善射以好思。耳目之欲接，則敗其思；蚊蠅之聲聞，則挫其精。是以聞耳目之欲，而遠蚊蠅之聲，閑居靜思則通。思仁若是，可謂微乎？孟子惡敗而出妻，可謂能自彊矣；未及思也。有子惡臥而燂掌，可謂能自忍矣；未及好也。聞耳目之欲，遠蚊蠅之聲，可謂危矣，未可謂微也。夫微者，至人也。至人也，何彊，何忍，何危？故濁明外景，清明內景。聖人縱其欲，兼其情，而制焉者理矣。夫何彊，何忍，何危？故仁者之行道也，無為也；聖人之行道也，無彊也。仁者之思也恭，聖者之思也樂，此治心之道也。⁶

There was a man who lived in a stone cave whose name was Ji. He was the kind of man who was expert at guessing riddles, which he was fond of pondering. But if he came in contact with the desires of the eyes and ears, then his thoughts would be shattered. If he heard the sounds of mosquitoes and gnats, it would destroy his concentration. For this reason, he avoided the desires of the eyes and ears and went far away from the sounds of mosquitoes and gnats. So he lived in leisure and pondered in quietude until he completely understood. If he had pondered the principle of humanness like this, could this be called subtle? Mencius hated impropriety and turned his wife out. This could be said to show he had personal strength of will but that he never reached real thought. Master You hated lying down, so he burned the palm of his hand. This could be said to show that he was able to exercise self-endurance, but that he never reached real devotion. To avoid the desires of the eyes and ears and go far away from the sounds of mosquitoes and gnats could be called anxiously keeping oneself on guard, but could never be called subtle. True subtlety is the quality of the perfect man. What need has the perfect man for strength of will, for endurance, or for anxiously keeping himself on guard? Thus, a muddled brightness casts an external shadow, and a pure brightness shows a reflection from within. The sage follows his desires and fulfills his feelings, but accords with rational principles of order in his regulation of them.⁷ Truly what need has he for strength of will, for endurance, or for anxiously keeping himself on guard? Thus, the benevolent man's practice of the way requires no action. The sage's practice of the way requires no strength of will. The thought of the benevolent man is reverent, and the thought of the sage is joyous. This is the way of putting the mind in order.

Xunzi begins his discussion by identifying a certain figure who is “fond of meditation” (*haosi* 好思) and who, in his attempt to curtail his desires, avoids distractions as small as the sounds of mosquitoes and gnats. According to Xunzi, these things would get in the way of his “living in leisure and pondering in quietude” (*xianju jingsi* 閑居靜思). None of this receives Xunzi’s approval, as he asks: 思仁若是，可謂微乎 “To ponder the principle of humanness like this, could this be called subtle?”

Right away, comparing Xunzi’s essay, particularly this last rhetorical question, with the Guodian manuscript “Five Conducts,” we see that the two are closely related. “Five Conducts” contains the statement (slips 12–13): 思(仁)之思也清(精) “The thought of humanness is refined,” for which “the thought of humanness” resembles Xunzi’s “pondering the principle of humanness” (*si ren* 思仁). As for “refined” (*jing* 精) from “Five Conducts,” it is a near synonym of “subtle” (*wei* 微) from Xunzi.⁸ It is evident that Xunzi is adapting the language of “Five Conducts” in questioning the very claim stated in that text. This is the reason that Xunzi ends with the assertion: 仁者之思也恭，聖者之思也樂，此治心之道也 “The thought of the benevolent man is reverent, and the thought of the sage is joyous; this is the way of putting the mind in order.” Except for the replacement of “refined” (*jing*) with “reverent” (*gong* 恭), this bears a closer resemblance to the same statement from “Five Conducts” and represents Xunzi’s attempt to rewrite that text.

To further make sense of Xunzi’s discussion in this essay, we can look deeper into the description of the man living in a stone cave, described by Xunzi as “living in leisure and pondering in quietude” (*xianju jingsi*). Here the expression “to live in leisure” (*xianju*) is key, for it describes a person’s withdrawal from public life and offers a clue to understanding Xunzi’s comment about Mencius, who is said to have divorced his wife for reasons unspecified in the essay. In a fuller account of this episode, now found in a collection of anecdotes that illustrate the *Book of Odes* called *Outer Commentaries of the Han Tradition of the Odes* (*Hanshi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳), we discover that the reason is due to the wife’s improper behavior:

孟子妻獨居，踞，孟子入戶視之；白其母曰：「婦無禮，請去之。」

Mencius' wife was alone, with her legs spread open. Mencius entered the door and saw her. He told his mother: "My wife has no sense of propriety, and I would like to send her away."⁹

Here the word "alone" (*du* 獨) contains the reason for Mencius' rejection of his wife: she was not mindful of her posture when she thought no one was looking. While Mencius' disapproval signals an attention to the female sex unparalleled in Xunzi's account about the man in a stone cave, the two share the same interest in a person's behavior when one is alone, and they use it to gauge the person's progress in the process of self-cultivation.¹⁰

Once again, comparing the account of Mencius with the Guodian manuscript "Five Conducts" (s. 16, 17–18), it comes as little surprise that the latter repeatedly evokes an injunction about *shen qi du* 懔(慎) 兀(其) 蜀(獨) "being watchful over oneself when alone."¹¹ This is further evidence that Xunzi's criticism is directed at a feature central to "Five Conducts."¹²

In his essay, Xunzi raises the question: 夫微者，至人也；至人也，何彊，何忍，何危 "True subtlety is the quality of the perfect man; what need has the perfect man for strength of will, for endurance, or for anxiously keeping himself on guard?" Here Xunzi is reserving the term "subtlety" (*wei*) to refer to his ideal of the perfect man, and this is contrasted with "strength of will" (*qiang* 彊), "endurance" (*ren* 忍), and especially "anxiously keeping oneself on guard" (*wei* 危), all of which merely expend one's energies without moving one closer to the goal of self-cultivation.

According to Xunzi, true self-cultivation requires one not to force one's efforts, as others do, but instead "to follow his desires and fulfill his feelings" (*zong qi yu, jian qi qing* 縱其欲，兼其情). The essay goes on to suggest: 故仁者之行道也，無為也；聖人之行道也，無彊也 "Thus, the benevolent man's practice of the way requires no action. The sage's practice of the way requires no strength of will." This is followed by the definition of "the way of ordering the mind" as cited above: "The thought of the benevolent man is reverent, and the thought of the sage is joyous." It is through "no action" (*wu wei* 無為) and "no strength of will" (*wu qiang* 無彊)

that one will become an ideal person, benevolent and sage. Note that Xunzi does not call for one to simply let go of one's desires and feelings. Although such freedom is desirable, it is attained only after a long and gradual process of self-cultivation. This process, not featured in "Dispelling Blindness," is explained in more detail in the essay "Nothing Indecorous," to which I will turn in a moment.

In the end, having considered Xunzi's essay, we recall that the man living in a stone cave has the name Ji 皃, which in its written form has the same phonetic element as Ji 伋, the personal name of Zisi, suggesting they were homophonous or nearly so in the language of ancient China. The two names must have referred to the same figure. If this suggestion is correct, given the close connection between "Dispelling Blindness" and "Five Conducts"—the former borrows from the latter's literary form in order to criticize its position—then it is to "Five Conducts" that we should turn for Zisi's teachings as understood by Xunzi.¹³

If, for a moment, we step away from Xunzi's essay and look elsewhere in the literary record, we find several accounts that hint at a similar disapproval of aloneness. The *Records of the Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) is a ritual compendium compiled during the Han (202 BCE–9 CE) based on earlier materials. In a text called "Rites in the Formation of Character" (*Liqi* 禮器), there is the following discussion:

禮之以多為貴者，以其外心者也。德發揚，詡萬物，大物理博。如此，則得不以多為貴乎？故君子樂其發也。禮之以少為貴者，以其內心者也。德產之致也精微，觀天下之物，無可以稱其德者。如此，則得不以少為貴乎？是故君子慎其獨也。古之聖人，內之為尊，外之為樂；少之為貴，多之為美。是故先王之制禮也，不可多也，不可寡也，唯其稱也。¹⁴

That in the instituting of rites the multitude of things was considered a mark of distinction, arose from the minds being directed outwards. Virtue shoots forth and is displayed everywhere in all things,¹⁵ with a great discriminating control over their vast multitude.¹⁶ In such a case, how could they keep from making multitude a mark of distinction in rites? Hence the gentleman rejoiced in displaying. That in the instituting of