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Xunzi

The Confucian Educator — Education, Ritual, and the Cultivation of Human Nature

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PART ONE

The Man and His World

第一部

Chapter One

The World of the Warring States

戰國

To understand Xunzi, one must first understand the world that formed him, a world at war with itself for more than two hundred years.

The Long Unraveling of Zhou

Around 1046 BCE, the Zhou people of the western Wei River valley overthrew the Shang dynasty, which had ruled the North China Plain for centuries. The Zhou founders, King Wen, King Wu, and the Duke of Zhou, became the model rulers of all later Confucian thought. Their achievement, as later generations remembered it, was not only military conquest but the creation of a civilization: a system of rituals, music, kinship obligations, and moral ideals that bound the rulers to Heaven, the lords to the king, and families to their ancestors.

The early Zhou ruled through what historians sometimes call a feudal system, though the word fits only loosely. The king granted territories to relatives and allies, who became lords of their own domains. These lords owed the king loyalty, military service, and ritual tribute. The whole structure was held together by kinship, by elaborate ceremonies that displayed rank, and by the moral authority of the Zhou house, which claimed to rule by the Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命).

Such a system worked as long as the center held. In 771 BCE it did not. Invaders sacked the western capital, the king was killed, and the court fled east to Luoyang. From that moment on, the Zhou kings reigned but did not rule. The great lords of Qi, Jin, Chu, Qin, and other states ran their own affairs, made their own wars, and treated the king as a ceremonial figurehead. The first part of this era, from 770 to about 476 BCE, is called the Spring and Autumn period, after a chronicle of the state of Lu that Confucius was believed to have edited. It was an age of shifting alliances, assassinations, and the slow erosion of the old ritual order.

Confucius (551–479 BCE) lived near the end of this period. He looked at the disorder around him and saw a moral catastrophe: lords using rituals reserved for the king, ministers usurping their lords, sons failing their fathers. His response was to call for a return to the Way of the early Zhou, not by force but by the cultivation of virtue in individuals, beginning with the ruling class. He taught that the gentleman (junzi 君子) must master the rituals (li 禮), practice humaneness (ren 仁), and lead by example. When the leaders are good, the people will follow, "as the grass bends when the wind blows over it."

Confucius was largely ignored by the rulers of his day. But his students carried his teachings forward, and within a few generations they had become a school, the Ru 儒, whom we call Confucians.

An Age of Total War

The Warring States period, conventionally dated from 475 BCE to the Qin unification in 221 BCE, was far more violent than the age Confucius knew. Its name is not an exaggeration. The dozens of states of the Spring and Autumn era were consolidated, through conquest, into a handful of great powers: Qin in the west, Chu in the south, Qi in the east, Yan in the northeast, and the three states that emerged when the great state of Jin split apart in 453 BCE, namely Han, Zhao, and Wei. Smaller states like Lu, Song, and Wey survived for a time as buffers or pawns.

War itself changed. In the Spring and Autumn period, battles were often fought by aristocrats in chariots, governed by codes of honor, and lasted a day. In the Warring States period, armies grew to hundreds of thousands of conscripted peasants armed with iron weapons and crossbows. Campaigns lasted months or years.

Cavalry, borrowed from the steppe peoples, appeared on the battlefield. Walls were built around entire states. Sieges starved whole cities.

The human cost was staggering. Ancient numbers are often inflated, but even allowing for exaggeration, the scale is horrifying. The most notorious example touched Xunzi directly. In 260 BCE, at Changping, the Qin general Bai Qi defeated the army of Zhao, Xunzi's home state. According to the Records of the Grand Historian, after the Zhao forces surrendered, Bai Qi had some four hundred thousand prisoners killed, many buried alive. Whether the true figure was a tenth of that or the whole of it, Changping became a symbol of the age: a world in which a state could lose a generation of its young men in a single campaign.

The Revolution in Government

To fight wars on this scale, states had to change how they were governed. The old hereditary aristocracy, whose power came from birth, was gradually replaced by a new class of officials appointed by the ruler and paid in grain or money rather than land. Rulers needed people who could manage taxation, census registers, grain stores, irrigation, conscription, and law. Ability began to matter more than lineage.

The most radical reforms took place in Qin under the minister Shang Yang (d. 338 BCE). He divided the population into groups of households that were mutually responsible for reporting crimes. He created a system of ranks earned through military merit, so that a peasant who took enemy heads in battle could rise above a nobleman's son who did not. He promoted agriculture and war as the only honorable occupations and discouraged commerce, scholarship, and anything else that distracted from the strength of the state. His laws were harsh and applied, at least in principle, to everyone. Shang Yang himself was eventually executed, but his system survived him, and it turned Qin into the most formidable war machine in China.

This new kind of state, centralized, bureaucratic, and organized for total mobilization, was something the Zhou founders had never imagined. And it raised a question that every thinker of the period had to face: if the old rituals and kinship bonds no longer held society together, what would?

The Hundred Schools

The same forces that made the Warring States so violent also made it the most creative period in the history of Chinese thought. The decline of the old aristocracy created a large class of educated men, the shi 士, who had learning but no inheritance. They made their living by offering their services to rulers as officials, advisors, strategists, diplomats, and teachers. Rulers, desperate for any advantage, competed to attract them. Ideas became a kind of currency.

Later Chinese historians spoke of the "Hundred Schools" (baijia 百家) of this era. The number is rhetorical, but the diversity was real. A few of the most important currents, all of which Xunzi would engage, deserve brief introduction here.

The Confucians (Ru 儒) taught the Way of the Zhou founders as interpreted by Confucius: ritual, humaneness, filial piety, and government by virtue. By the fourth century BCE they had divided into several lineages. The most influential of these looked to Confucius' grandson Zisi and to Mencius (c. 372–289 BCE), who taught that human nature is good.

The Mohists (Mojia 墨家), followers of Mozi (c. 470–391 BCE), were the Confucians' great rivals. Mozi taught "impartial care" (jian'ai 兼愛), the doctrine that one should care for all people equally rather than favoring one's own family and state. He condemned offensive war, elaborate funerals, and expensive musical performances as wasteful of resources the people needed to survive. The Mohists were organized almost like a religious order, with a leader and strict discipline, and they were famous for traveling to besieged cities to help them defend themselves. They also developed sophisticated logic and early science.

The Daoists, a label applied later to the authors of texts such as the Laozi (also called the Daodejing) and the Zhuangzi, questioned the whole project of moral and political improvement. The Laozi taught

that the best ruler governs by "non-action" (wuwei 無為), letting the people return to simplicity. The Zhuangzi, with its wild humor and dazzling stories, mocked the Confucian obsession with rites and distinctions and celebrated a spontaneous freedom in harmony with the transformations of nature.

The thinkers later called Legalists (Fajia 法家), such as Shang Yang, Shen Buhai, and Shen Dao, focused on the techniques of state power: clear laws, rewards and punishments, administrative methods for controlling officials, and the "positional power" (shi 勢) of the ruler. They had little interest in moral transformation and were openly skeptical of Confucian appeals to the ancient kings.

The Dialecticians or School of Names (Mingjia 名家), such as Hui Shi and Gongsun Long, explored paradoxes of language and logic. Gongsun Long's famous argument that "a white horse is not a horse" seemed to many contemporaries to be clever nonsense. Xunzi would treat such arguments as genuinely dangerous.

There were others too: the Yin-Yang cosmologists such as Zou Yan, the agriculturalists who wanted rulers to plow beside their people, the strategists of war such as the authors of the Sunzi bingfa (The Art of War), and the hedonists and individualists associated with the name Yang Zhu. The intellectual world of the late Warring States was crowded, argumentative, and fiercely competitive.

Xunzi's Position in This World

Xunzi came of age in the last and most desperate phase of this era. He was born around 310 BCE, more than a century and a half after Confucius' death and probably within Mencius' lifetime, though there is no evidence they ever met. By the time Xunzi was an adult, the outcome of the great struggle was becoming clear. Qin was winning. Its methods, ruthless, efficient, and indifferent to Confucian ideals, seemed to be vindicated by results.

This is crucial for understanding Xunzi. He was not a philosopher of a peaceful age speaking to people who could afford idealism. He was a Confucian living at the precise moment when Confucianism seemed to be losing the argument to history. Kings asked him openly whether the Ru were of any use at all. His own students would conclude that they were not.

Xunzi's response was to make Confucianism tougher. He accepted many of the hard truths that the Legalists and realists insisted on: that people are driven by desire and self-interest, that order does not arise by itself, that states need laws, ranks, and an army. But he argued that these truths, properly understood, led not to Shang Yang's harsh machinery but back to the Way of the sage kings. If people are naturally disorderly, then the rituals and moral education that the Confucians championed were not sentimental luxuries but the most powerful technology of order ever devised. A state that relied only on punishments and rewards would get obedience at best, and only as long as its power lasted. A state that transformed its people through ritual and learning would get loyalty, harmony, and lasting strength.

Seen this way, Xunzi's philosophy is a great act of synthesis. He absorbed what was valuable in his rivals, the Mohist concern for order and resources, the Daoist insight into the mind and nature, the Legalist realism about power, the dialecticians' attention to language, and he set all of it within a reformed Confucian framework. His aim was nothing less than to show that the Confucian Way was the comprehensive truth of which every other school had grasped only a part.

That ambition was shaped above all in one remarkable place: the Jixia Academy in the city of Linzi, capital of Qi. It is there that our story of Xunzi's life must begin.

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