

# In the Shadow of the Decay. The Philosophy of History of Mencius and Xunzi\*

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## Abstract

The aim of my paper is to analyze the debate between Mencius and Xunzi from the perspective of their views on the nature of the historical process. The Mencian approach embraces not only elaboration on the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven, resulting in a cyclical vision of history, but also strong idealization of the past. I will show that *ren* (benevolence), treated as a historical principle, could link two dimensions of his historical thinking: the moral and ontological. Xunzi rejected the possibility of the intervention of Heaven in history, however, his theory of rituals and belief in moral use of history made his philosophy of history much more conservative, embalming the idealization of the past. In short, I will look for the main common points and differences between these two major figures of Confucianism regarding their views on history, attempting to answer which beliefs could constitute a unique Confucian philosophy of history.

**Keywords:** Confucianism, Mencius, Xunzi, philosophy of history, Mandate of Heaven, idealization

## V senci propada. Mencijeva in Xunzijeva filozofija zgodovine

### Izvleček

Osrednji namen prispevka je analiza debat med Mencijem in Xunzijem z upoštevanjem njihovih stališč o naravi zgodovinskega procesa. Mencijevo izhodišče ni opredeljeno zgolj z nadgradnjo doktrine Nebeškega mandata, katere rezultat je ciklično dojemanje zgodovine, temveč tudi z intenzivno idealizacijo preteklosti. Avtor pokaže, da lahko koncept *ren* v vlogi zgodovinskega principa poveže obe osrednji dimenziji njegove historiografske miselnosti: moralno in ontološko. Xunzi pa je možnost poseganja Neba v zgodovino zanimal, četudi je njegova teorija zgodovinopisja zaradi teorije obrednosti in moralne funkcije zgodovine, ki prav tako zaobjema idealizacijo preteklosti, veliko bolj konservativna od Mencijeve. Avtor se osredotoči na osrednje razlike med obema historiografskima teorijama, da bi si odgovoril na vprašanje, katera je bila pomembnejša za specifično konfucijansko filozofijo zgodovine.

**Ključne besede:** konfucijanstvo, Mencij, Xunzi, filozofija zgodovine, Nebeški mandat, idealizacija

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## Introduction

Two major figures of early Confucianism—Mencius and Xunzi—have been the subject of numerous comparisons, most of which started from elucidation of their views on human nature (Soles 2008) and then analyzed their concepts of virtue (Jiyuan 2005; Nivison and van Norden 1996), moral feelings (Lodén 2009; Chong 2003), ritual (Kim 2011, 2012) or politics (Twiss and Chan 2012; Kim 2016). However, I have not found a paper devoted to an analysis of their views on history, despite the fact both Mencius and Xunzi created intriguing philosophies of history. The aim of this paper is thus to fill this gap and explicate their concepts of the historical process. Of course, both Mencius and Xunzi did not perceive reflection on history as an independent discipline, different from other fields of philosophical inquiry. However, this should not be an obstacle, since it also concerns their ethics and political philosophy. We therefore have to read *Mengzi* and *Xunzi* once again, but from the perspective of their modes of historical thinking, as this would help to us see a rather ignored yet impressive literature on a Confucian philosophy of history. In order to avoid laying out Western (especially Hegelian) ways of understanding the task of a philosophy of history, we will follow the proven path of extensional definition, and so determine (by enumerating exemplars) which type of questions are posed by philosophers of history, and then examine these on the basis of works of Mencius and Xunzi.

Let me specify some of the questions forming part of the subject of interest of the philosophy of history in its classical sense.<sup>1</sup> First of all, it is an idea about the rational order of the historical process, making it something more than a mere sequence of events, e.g. whether history is linear or cyclical or a combination of those two modes, or something else. After we have determined the shape of the historical process we could ask about its direction: typically, progress or idealization of the past (or eternal return, and so on.). We can then suppose that this order is embodied in God, *Weltgeist*, Heaven or Dao, manifesting itself in the history. If we do not believe in such an extraordinary supervisor then we are still philosophers of history, what is often not fully acknowledged by critics of the philosophy of history. Furthermore, we have to answer whether there are historical “heroes”, or prominent individuals who were given certain special historical missions (or not). Some answers exclude others. For instance, if we believe in the Absolute manifesting in history, giving a sort of historical mission to emperors or prophets, we could hardly maintain that nature or economics constitute an ultimate basis of

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1 Arthur Danto distinguished substantial and analytical philosophies of history (Danto 1968). The way I understand “classical” philosophy of history is thus similar to his notion of a “substantial” philosophy of history, albeit Chinese philosophy was in close contact with historiography.

all historical changes. This choice is widely known as that between historical idealism and materialism. But we have still not even touched on another key problem of the philosophy of history, that is how the past influence the present and how it is connected with the future. One of the possible connections between these three times is a moral one (e.g. *historia magistra vitae*). That implies a particular attitude towards historiography and myths of beginning. To simplify work on as comparative history of historical thinking, some theorists propose ready-made matrixes of notions, e.g. Jörn Rüsen offers whole list of Chinese correlatives for such Western terms like memory, sense, history, tradition, evolution, progress, collapse and revolution (Rüsen et al. 2015, 108–9). Instead of proposing such a table, we will carefully analyze the text, focusing not only on the terms, but also on the whole emplotment (Hayden White's term) and the context of the delineation of certain concepts.

Without doubt, these investigations will be helpful not only for historians and philosophers, but also for scholars in Chinese studies, shedding a new light on the similarities and differences between these two thinkers, and hopefully helping us leave behind some inadequate interpretations, notably in the case of Xunzi. For instance, Q.E. Wang writes that “Xunzi hinted at the idea of progress or evolution in history” (Ng and Wang 2005, 49). We will see that such a superposition of Xunzi with the Legalists is far from accurate, and, not without effort, we can describe the Confucian philosophy of history as a coherent unit, different from its Legalist, Mohist and Daoist counterparts.

## To Follow the Shadow of the Sages: Mengzi's Idealization of the Past

One of the most striking features of Mengzi's philosophy (and his literary style) is the idealization of the past, particularly (but not only) the times of great founders of dynasties: Zhou Wenwang (1152–1056 BCE), the founder of the Zhou Dynasty,<sup>2</sup> Cheng Tang (c.1675–1646 BCE), the founder of the Shang dynasty and, even before, the times of the legendary emperors Yao (c. 2356–2255 BCE) and Shun (c. 2294–2184 BCE), the first human rulers “under Heaven”. Idealization means, firstly, that the behavior, words, decisions, and so on of these rulers followed and perfectly applied (Confucian) moral norms. As such, their actions differ significantly from those seen in the Mencian era. They are ideal not because their patterns of conduct could not be achieved, but because such conduct should

2 Although Zhou Wenwang received a lot of esteem from Confucians, it was his son, King Wu of Zhou who finally overthrew the Shangs. Mencius referred to his figure as well, cf. M VIIA, 30 or VIIIB, 79.

be followed by all people in all times: “Shun was a man and I am also a man. But Shun became an example to all people in the kingdom and his conduct is worthy to be transmitted to later generations.”<sup>3</sup> It is said, for instance, that Zhou Wenwang governed with benevolent action,<sup>4</sup> looked on the people as on a man who was wounded<sup>5</sup> and shared his pleasures with the people.<sup>6</sup> It is also claimed that whole world put their faith in Tang.<sup>7</sup> As far as Yao and Shun are concerned, we can find even clearer examples: Shun completely fulfilled the duties of what constitutes filial piety<sup>8</sup> and, moreover, the same “great Shun had a great delight in regarding virtue as the common property of the people”.<sup>9</sup> This example credits Shun with some sort of moral theory, and one that is notably close to Mencian ethics. In fact, we can find that the moral theory of Mencius was projected back onto the times of Yao and Shun, and this is the second sense of the idealization of the past in his philosophy: modelling the past in compliance with certain philosophical principles. Let us consider the following statement: “Mencius explained to him that man’s nature is good, always making laudatory reference to Yao and Shun”.<sup>10</sup> Here we have not only an act of attribution with regard to the purely Mencian doctrine of human nature, but also an explicit mention of Mencius himself (probably made by one of his disciples editing the work), which shows that Yao and Shun served as important stylistic figures. In other words, in order to justify his concepts, Mencius put his own beliefs into the mouths of Yao and Shun: “I do not dare to set forth before the king anything but the ways of Yao and Shun”.<sup>11</sup> In the same way, Mencius tried to authenticate his political theory: after delineation of the politics of Yao and Shun, he wrote: “one who does not serve his sovereign like Shun served Yao, does not respect his sovereign”. Such a commandment has the force of rhetorical emphasis, or even a formal tool: “do it, because Yao and Shun did it”. The figures of Yao and Shun were also invoked in order to promote concrete political solutions, e.g. M VI B, 30 vis-à-vis the ideal tax system.

3 舜人也，我亦人也。舜為法於天下，可傳於後世；M IVB, 56. “M” will denote *Mengzi*. “A” and “B” refer to “上” and “下” characters in the titles of respective chapters. In matters of paragraph divisions, I am following Chinese Text Project edition (see: References). All quotes without a translator mentioned have been translated by the author.

4 文王發政施仁；M IIB, 12.

5 M IVB, 48.

6 M IIB, 11.

7 天下信之；M IB, 18.

8 M IVA, 28.

9 大舜有大焉，善與人同；M IIA, 8.

10 孟子道性善，言必稱堯舜；M IIIA, 1.

11 我非堯舜之道，不敢以陳於王前；M IIB, 11.

It has to be stressed, however, that such a tool was not Mengzi's invention, and there are numerous references to Yao and Sun in the Confucian Dialogues.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly enough, Mencius made a significant criticism of the Mohist Yizhi 夷之 in this regard, who referred to the ways of the ancients in order to justify the doctrine of universal love.<sup>13</sup> Zhuangzi also used this rhetorical tool, referring to the figures of Yao and Shun in order to attack Confucian values.<sup>14</sup> We can thus see that Yao and Shun were common vehicles for expressing one's own beliefs in the Warring States period, mostly owing to Confucianism.

Nonetheless, one can claim that so far we have analyzed nothing but Mengzi's attitude towards great emperors. Even if idealized, supposing such views still broadly agree with their historical records, this does not propose any independent philosophy of history that would not be rooted in general, historiographical views of their reigns. Indeed, Mencius stressed the necessity of learning histories, as follows:

When a scholar feels that his friendship with all the virtuous scholars of the kingdom is not sufficient to satisfy him, he proceeds to ascend to consider the men of antiquity. He repeats their poems, and reads their books, and as he does not know what they were as men, to ascertain this, he considers their history.<sup>15</sup>

But even a superficial review of the ancient Chinese chronicles does not allow us to share Mengzi's optimism on this point, as kings often killed and betrayed the allies. What should we do when faced with such a contradiction? Mengzi's answer is: so much the worse for the facts. "Mencius said, 'It would be better to be without the *Book of History* than to give entire credit to it. In the 'Completion of the War', I select two or three passages only, which I believe.'<sup>16</sup>

With this statement, disputing the reliability of a work which finally became the part of Confucian Classics (五經, *Wujing*), Mencius gave priority to his own philosophy, making it a starting point of much reflection on history. It does not mean that he totally rejected *Shangshu* as a source of historical knowledge (he quotes it from time to time, cf. M IVA, 8), but the way he used this (and any other) historical source was highly selective. We could say that this attitude constitutes the third meaning of the notion of the idealization of the past: the more we idealize a story, the more we wander from the account of "what really happened".

12 *Lunyu* VI, 30; VIII, 19–20; XII, 22; XIV, 42; XV, 5.

13 M IIIA, 5.

14 *Zhuangzi* I, 4; II, 10; XII, 6; XIII, 5; XXII, 4; XXIII, 2; XXIV, 5.12.

15 M VB, 17. J. Legge's translation.

16 M VIIB, 49. J. Legge's translation.

Apart from references to particular rulers, Mencius discussed former kings and the ancients in general, which should finally dispel any doubts that his reflections in this context depend on previous histories. This shows that he was not interested in praising singular individuals, but all rulers and all people of ancient times, and thus his idealization of the past was very broad. None of the actions of the so-called former kings (先王, *xianwang*) are described as wild or lost.<sup>17</sup> Their hearts are full of compassion for the people, and their politics follow this attitude.<sup>18</sup> Virtuous monarchs of antiquity loved virtue and therefore forgot about the immoral use of their political power.<sup>19</sup> And although Mencius wrote that the influence of *junzi* ends in the fifth generation,<sup>20</sup> this did not prevent him from stating that the principles of both earlier and later kings were the same.<sup>21</sup> This idea is thus the key bone of contention between Mencius and Xunzi in the context of this study.

As we have already said, Mencius used not only the notion of former kings, but also the term 古之人 *guzhiren*, “the people of antiquity”. It is explicitly claimed that the ancients surpassed other men because they did nothing but that which was good.<sup>22</sup> They raised their children in the same manner, but were not attached to their own vested interests: “the ancients exchanged sons, and one taught the son of another”.<sup>23</sup> Although they sought high offices, none of these men wanted to fulfill obligations in an improper way,<sup>24</sup> and so there was peace in the whole kingdom (cf. M VIIB, 54). Their moral conduct stemmed from systematic effort and self-restraint, while also accompanied by common pleasures<sup>25</sup> and full of utility: “if you make half of the achievements that have been done by the ancients, you will be surely accompanied by success”.<sup>26</sup> The unity of deontological, hedonistic and utilitarian aspects that is proposed depicts the ancients as a pure ideal of conduct, making them (especially former kings and founders of dynasties) exemplars to be followed by all following ages. People who repeat that “born in this age, we should be of this age” have the moral standards of eunuchs.<sup>27</sup> This unity shows also that three kinds of idealization (distinguished, at a first glance, quite artificially) are

17 M IB, 11.

18 先王有不忍人之心，斯有不忍人之政矣；M IIA, 6.

19 古之賢王好善而忘勢；M VIIA, 8.

20 M IVB, 50.

21 先聖後聖，其揆一也；M IVB, 29.

22 古之人所以大過人者無他焉，善推其所為而已矣；M IA, 7.

23 M IV A, 18.

24 古之人未嘗不欲仕也，又惡不由其道；M IIIB, 8.

25 古之人與民偕樂；M IA, 1.

26 故事半古之人，功必倍之；M IIA, 1.

27 生斯世也，為斯世也，善斯可矣。闞然媚於世也者；M VIIB, 83.

one and the same way of thinking: we have to read chronicles (third kind) as a manual of proper conduct (second kind), embodied in the figures of the ancients (first kind).

## The Shadow High as Heaven: Mengzi's Metaphysics of History

The moral use of the past is not what the whole Mencius consists of. In the field of the philosophy of history, apart from its ethical dimension, we also have to elucidate ontological concepts of history, which seems to be quite opposite to what we have already described. What I am thinking of is Mengzi's theory of Heaven (天, *Tian*) and its impact on human history, particularly the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven (天命, *Tianming*). Mencius is convinced that only by receiving the favor of Heaven can one achieve significant results with any endeavor.<sup>28</sup> There is no way, for example, to besiege a city, if Heaven did not send down the right moment for doing so.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, not being equal to the task that Heaven has placed before us at a particular time and place, results in disasters that Heaven visits on us.<sup>30</sup> Heaven cares for those who obey its commands: it preserves their countries and helps them conquer what is under Heaven.<sup>31</sup> Those who rebel against the will of Heaven, will surely pass away.<sup>32</sup> Mohist imputations of fatalism to Confucians are, therefore, to some extent valid. Although Mencius agreed with his Master that Heaven does not speak, but only manifests its will through the course of events,<sup>33</sup> he credited Heaven with features making it responsible for all events happening objectively, mostly those unexplained rationally. In M VA, 6 he provides specific criterion, allowing us to see which actions are caused by Heaven:

- (1) What man cannot make, comes from Heaven;
- (2) That which does not have the perpetrator, comes from Heaven;
- (3) That which does not have (recognized) cause and purpose, comes from the command of Heaven.<sup>34</sup>

As we can see, the triple criterion could also include natural disasters and seemingly random factors enabling the seizure of power: the right time, a favorable combination of events or the right people encountered on the road of life. In this

28 若夫成功，則天也；M IIB, 21.

29 夫環而攻之，必有得天時者矣；M IIA, 10.

30 不取，必有天殃；M IB, 17.

31 樂天者保天下，畏天者保其國；M IB, 10.

32 順天者存，逆天者亡；M IVA, 7.

33 天不言以行與事示之而已矣；M VA, 5.

34 皆天也，非人之所能為也。莫之為而為者，天也；莫之致而至者，命也。

respect, the Mencian concept of Heaven ties in with the basic sense of the term “providence” in Western culture. Whereas Europeans talk about the “providential man”, Mencius introduces the figure of the “minister of Heaven” (天吏 *Tianli*, cf. M IIA, 5 or IIB, 7). What we mean here is only a structural counterpart, and not the meaning itself: both terms have meaning in relation to other terms, which are strictly different, especially regarding the attitude towards Transcendence.

Notwithstanding this, it is only one side of the Mencian theory of *Tian*. The other is that one has to receive any gift of Heaven in humility, because what is sent by Heaven comes naturally. Heaven’s gift is thus the culmination of the way than a ready solution (*deus ex machina*): “When Heaven is about to confer a great office on any man, it first exercises his mind with suffering, and his sinews and bones with toil. It exposes his body to hunger, and subjects him to extreme poverty.”<sup>35</sup>

It is thus sometimes necessary to wait hundreds of years, until the desired, outstanding individual called by Heaven will reveal himself.<sup>36</sup> Only a person who faithfully serves Heaven is able to overcome all these difficulties.<sup>37</sup> He is also able to overthrow all his opponents, with the result that there are no enemies throughout the state.<sup>38</sup> This is the reason why not a few scholars claim that Mencius’ theory of Heaven is nothing but a theory of the legitimization of power. On the one hand, in contrast to Legalists, it is also the theory of moral legitimacy: Mencius does not see any possibility for political takeover made by murderer basing solely on *Realpolitik*. If someone came to power and established a new dynasty then he was able to do so because it was the will of Heaven, which had previously tested him. On the other hand, Mencius never answered what kind of being *Tian* exactly is. He does not provide a clear explanation, because he defines Heaven through its functions (“creates”, “rewards”, “listens to”, etc.), and not by predicates (Zeng 2013). A famous statement made by Robert Eno seems to be rooted in a similar remark, summarized as follows: Confucianism is not “about” *Tian*, and the concept of Heaven serves as a “rhetorical anchor” for other kind of beliefs (Eno 1990, 5). El Amine is not so radical in denying ontological considerations at all, but still argues that the political theory centered on the idea of Heaven was independent from any metaphysics of *Tian* (El Amine 2015, 178). If ontological reflection on the nature of Heaven (or rather the lack of it) is irrelevant for political philosophy, it should thus not be a primary subject of our main concern, which is an interpretation of the philosophy of history. The Mandate of Heaven results in

35 M VIB, 35. J. Legge’s translation.

36 M IIB, 22.

37 為天吏，則可以伐之；M IIB, 7. Here we have the same *Tianli* that means “minister of Heaven”.

38 無敵於天下者使也；M IIA, 5.

the founding of new dynasties (and the fall of the old), along with the raising up of eminent individuals, i.e. historical heroes, and thus *Tian* intervenes in history, no matter what *Tian* is.

Interpretations arguing that *Tian* was used in order to legitimize political power at the same time reverse (in a critical manner) the view of Mengzi himself: only moral individuals can receive the Mandate of Heaven, and history is full of such examples. In a long dialogue with Wan Zhang, Mencius explained how the sages had received their thrones, and he noticed that, on closer examination, nobody had given another person the throne:

The sovereign can present a man to Heaven, but he cannot make Heaven give that man the throne (...) Yao presented Shun to Heaven, and Heaven accepted him. He presented him to the people, and the people accepted him (...) When Heaven gave the kingdom to the worthiest, it was given to the worthiest. When Heaven gave it to the son of the preceding sovereign, it was given to him. Shun presented Yu to Heaven (...) In the case of a private individual obtaining the throne, there must be in him virtue equal to that of Shun or Yu; and moreover there must be the presenting of him to Heaven by the preceding sovereign. It was on this account that Confucius did not obtain the throne. When the kingdom is possessed by natural succession, the sovereign who is displaced by Heaven must be like Jie or Zhou (...) Confucius said, “Tang and Yu resigned the throne to their worthy ministers. The sovereign of Xia and those of Yin and Zhou transmitted it to their sons. The principle of righteousness was the same in all the cases.”<sup>39</sup>

### *Ren* as the Principle of Historical Cycles

This passage from M VA, 5–6 provides us with explicit elucidation of the Mencian philosophy of history. What is more, it shows a connection between two dimensions of his historical thinking which seem to be separate: on the one hand, idealization and moral use of the past, and on the other, a quasi-ontological theory of Heaven being a historical agent. Throughout all of (Chinese) history, successors were proposed by current rulers because of the virtue of candidates, then accepted and appointed by Heaven and finally accepted by the people (in consonance with the principle of 民本 *minben*). “The principle of righteousness was the same in all

39 M VA, 5–6. J. Legge’s translation.

the cases”, a general rule of historical change from the legendary emperors until the Zhou dynasty. As appointed by *Tian*, these historical heroes (especially the founders of dynasties) could serve as moral examples for the following generations: this is what I mean by unity of two dimensions. Counterexamples of cruel rulers or righteous people who did not obtain the throne (like Confucius) do not falsify Mencius’ thesis: they only show that one of the conditions was not fulfilled, e.g. Confucius was not presented as a candidate, and tyrants were not accepted by Heaven.

We can go further and ask which principle makes king a king, a person who changes the course of history. Mencius’ answer is: benevolence (仁 *ren*). “The worthiest” were not full of any kind of virtue or virtue in every meaning of this word (cf. the notion of 德 *de* in Daoism), but instead were worthy because of *ren*. All those who conquer the world can be called benevolent.<sup>40</sup> This statement is found amid a few sentences describing how Yao, Shun and Yu ordered the world and made Middle Kingdom so different from barbarian countries. In M VIIB, 12 this is made even more explicit: “there are instances of individuals without benevolence, who possessed a single state, but there has been no instance of one who got the world without benevolence”.<sup>41</sup> What Mencius aims to say here is that the past should be followed not because it is a past, but rather because it was benevolent. However, only some of the past is good, based on the supposed fact that everything the founders of dynasties and great emperors did was good, one has to be aware of the other side. In other words: antiquity alone is not a pattern of conduct, and thus the Mencian idealization of the past is not naïve; *ren* alone is not sufficient to have historical influence, as one must also be compliant with ancient laws:

The principles of Yao and Shun, without a benevolent government, could not secure the tranquil order of the kingdom. There are now princes who have benevolent hearts and a reputation for benevolence, while yet the people do not receive any benefits from them, nor will they leave any example to future ages—all because they do not put into practice the ways of the ancient kings. Hence we have the saying: “Virtue alone is not sufficient for the exercise of government; laws alone cannot carry themselves into practice”. It is said in the *Book of Poetry*, “Without transgression, without forgetfulness, Following the ancient statutes”. Never has any one fallen into error, who followed the laws of the ancient kings.<sup>42</sup>

40 為天下得人者謂之仁; M IIIA, 4.

41 不仁而得國者, 有之矣; 不仁而得天下, 未之有也.

42 M IVA, 1. J. Legge’s translation.

We could even say that for Mencius *ren* is the principle of history: if the conduct of the ancients was benevolent, they were respected by Heaven and hence able to do what seems beyond human power and change the history of the world. But if *ren* is a principle of history then this statement has two implications: the first is that it remains the same throughout history, but the second is that it has to change things—there is no “history” without a change. The question thus arises: what is to be changed?

The change is determined by the difference, and this is also true in this case: rulers are benevolent or not. The possession or lack of benevolence has historical impact: “it was by benevolence that the Three Dynasties gained the throne, and by not being benevolent that they lost it”.<sup>43</sup> As we can see, the Mandate of Heaven is not mentioned here—rulers owe it to themselves to bring their dynasties to collapse. On a large scale this concerns whole dynasties, as the Three Dynasties mentioned are of course the Xia, the Shang and the Zhou, covering the whole of Chinese history before Mencius. Cyclical “transformations of *ren*” are therefore identical with dynastic cycles. In this way Mencius laid the foundations for this influential idea, developed later by Dong Zhongshu by mixture of Confucianism and yin-yang school. In M VII B, 37, in the last remaining passage of *Book of Mencius*, the Chinese philosopher determined the length of each cycle, estimating it for 500 years. However, in order to massage his calculations he treated Confucius as a king (without a crown), which means that his contemporaries would have had to wait another four centuries for the end of the cycle.<sup>44</sup>

The difference between the beginning and the ending of each cycle is called “period of harmony and period of chaos” 一治一亂 *yizhi yiluan* (M III B, 14), in just the same phrase as was later used by Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692) (Liu 2001, 198). The other difference has to be made between the principles of the sages and morality of Mengzi’s contemporaries. Even in periods of harmony, the moral standards of the people were often not—as in the time of Mencius—as high as those in the times of Yao and Shun. We thus not only have a cyclical change of harmony-*ren* and chaos-*buren*, but also a linear and graduating decay of the principles, so strongly stressed by idealization of the past:

From Tang to Wu Ding there had appeared six or seven worthy and sage sovereigns (...) Then, Zhou was removed from Wu Ding by no great

43 三代之得天下也以仁, 其失天下也以不仁; M IVA, 3.

44 That is the times of the Eastern Han dynasty, but since the Han dynasty in general was established in 206 B.C., Mencius’ figures were quite wrong. His calculations were used by Sima Tan, who in *Lun liujia yaozhi* predicted that a “new Confucius” should write a chronicle for his own times, just like Kongzi made *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Shiji* V, 130). In this respect, the new cycle began with Sima Qian.

interval of time (...) There were still remaining some of the ancient families and of the old manners (...) The present time is one in which the royal dignity may be easily attained. In the flourishing periods of the Xia, Yin, and Zhou dynasties, the royal domain did not exceed a thousand li (...) never was there a time when the sufferings of the people from tyrannical government were more intense than the present.<sup>45</sup>

From times of Yao and Shun, and the times of Zhou Wenwang, there were periods with “several” good kings and when “something remained” from the old customs of the Zhou, up to the times when tyrants were governing their countries, and the one kingdom of Zhou had been divided into separate and warring states. In fact, this is not only an interpretation that we use in order to connect a more cyclical approach with the linear view of gradual collapse (after already having linked the moral use of the past with reflection on the historical role of Heaven). Mencius himself gives such an account, as follows:

After the death of Yao and Shun, the principles that mark sages fell into decay. Oppressive sovereigns arose one after another, who pulled down houses to make ponds and lakes, so that the people knew not where they could rest in quiet (...) By the time of the tyrant Zhou 紂,<sup>46</sup> the kingdom was again in a state of great confusion. Zhou Gong 周公<sup>47</sup> assisted king Wu, and destroyed Zhou. He smote Yan, and after three years put its sovereign to death (...) Again the world fell into decay, and principles faded away. Perverse speakings and oppressive deeds waxed rife again. There were instances of ministers who murdered their sovereigns, and of sons who murdered their fathers. Confucius was afraid, and made the “Spring and Autumn” (...) Once more, sage sovereigns cease to arise, and the princes of the States give the reins to their lusts. Unemployed scholars indulge in unreasonable discussions. The words of Yang Zhu and Mo Di fill the country (...) When benevolence and righteousness are stopped up, beasts will be led on to devour men, and men will devour one another. I am alarmed by these things, and address myself to the defence of the doctrines of the former sages, and to oppose Yang and Mo (...) When sages shall rise up again, they will not change my words.<sup>48</sup>

45 M IIA, 1. J. Legge's translation.

46 Last ruler of the Shang dynasty.

47 That is Zhou Wenwang.

48 M IIIB, 14. J. Legge's translation, italics made by the author.

This passage gives us the most comprehensive exposition of the Mencian philosophy of history, combining an idea of the decay of the ancient principles with cycles of arising sages (cf. italics). It also provides us with an important theory of why Confucius wrote the *Spring and Autumn Annals* in order to save some of the Zhou principles, just before the next period of chaos. Mencius encapsulated all the dimensions of his philosophy of history, including the moral use of the past, in this one passage.

### Moral Use of History in Xunzi

The motif of the moral use of the past, known in the Western culture as *historia magistra vitae*, was also an integral part of Classical Chinese (or at least Confucian) culture (Rüsen 2007), and Xunzi was not an exception in this regard: “We observe past events that we can take precautions against them. Order, anarchy, right and wrong as well can be recognized in them”.<sup>49</sup>

The abovementioned recognition is not different from education (thus making the comparison to *magistra vitae* possible): “if you have not heard the words inherited from the Ancient Kings, you will be unaware of the greatness of learning and inquiry”.<sup>50</sup> Or, in other words, “knowledge that does not fit with the standards of the Ancient Kings, though hard won, is said to be that of a dissolute mind”.<sup>51</sup> What is more, learning does not refer to a purely intellectual activity. It implies the practice of rituals and music in the shape created by the ancient kings (cf. X 20, 4 and X 20, 13). It means also, if not first of all, that the words and deeds of the ancient kings should be present, i.e. repeated, in one’s own life. *Xunzi* is characterized as a person who “in conducting his affairs observes the usual customs of the past”.<sup>52</sup> Finally, for someone who, in addition to his own life has to govern other people’s, as is this case for politicians, the past should also be a pattern of ideal government. In X 5, 3 and X 8, 4 Xunzi uses exactly the same sentence: 後世言惡，則必稽焉 (“whenever we of later generations speak about evil, we must always examine their cases”), and it appears just after the stories of particular ancient kings. In the commentary to Xunzi, John Knoblock aptly noted:

49 觀往事，以自戒，治亂是非亦可識；X 25, 3. “X” will denote “Xunzi”. I am using Arabic numerals for chapters, because the abbreviation “X” could mean “ten” in Roman numerals. For quotations I rely on J. Knoblock’s translation: Xunzi (1988, 199), Xunzi (1990, 200), Xunzi (1994), although with respect to division I am still following Chinese Text Project, different from the sequence employed by Knoblock.

50 治亂是非亦可識；X 1, 2.

51 勞知而不律先王，謂之姦心；X 6, 10.

52 事行則遵備故；X 9, 26.

Xunzi shares with most of his contemporaries the belief that history provides the basis on which any philosophy of government must be based (...) Political philosophy, then, is inseparable from the study of history and, in Xunzi's particular view, of ritual principles (...) The model left behind by the sages is the starting point for any analysis of the proper form and function of the government. (Xunzi 1990, 200: 3)

The keyword of the last sentence is “model”. Here model means not only something on which the latter is being modeled, but also a representation which consists of numerous items structured in proper order. It is not a single instance, but a set of examples. Thus Xunzi wrote that “to oppose ritual is the same as lacking a model”<sup>53</sup> and, as a result, “well ordered’ refers to ritual and moral principles and ‘chaotic’ refers to what is contrary to them”.<sup>54</sup> And again, not any kind of rituals but concrete customs of antiquity, as they are described in the Classics: “the Way of the Hundred kings is at one with the sage. Hence, the Way expressed in the *Odes, Documents, Rituals* and *Music* returns to this oneness”.<sup>55</sup> However, rituals are not perceived there as an artificial activity, contrasted with benevolence, despite the fact that Xunzi actually prefers to link righteousness with rituals (禮義 *liyi*) rather than benevolence, but still an imitation of the model of the ancient kings has to be full of benevolence, because their conduct was *ren* to the utmost extent: “how much more important, then, are the ways of the Ancient Kings, the guiding principles of humanity and justice, and the pattern of life given in the *Odes, Documents, Rituals*, and *Music*; they certainly contain the most important thoughts in the world”.<sup>56</sup> The Classics are much more than a handbook or guide:

Learning—where should it begin and where should it end! I say: Its proper method is to start with the recitation of the Classics and conclude with the reading of the Rituals. Its real purpose is first to create a scholar and in the end to create a sage.<sup>57</sup>

The goal of education is expressed in the most conservative way: one has to read and learn nothing but the Classics, giving priority to the *Book of Rituals*. What is interesting, from the point of view of the individual, is that one has to make progress in learning: to start from zero, to recite the Classics, and to end with the *Book of Rituals*. But from the perspective of the society, nothing could change the state

53 非禮是無法也; X 2, 10.

54 禮義之謂治, 非禮義之謂亂也; X 3, 7.

55 百王之道一是矣。故詩書禮樂之道歸是矣; X 8, 16.

56 況夫先王之道, 仁義之統, 詩書禮樂之分乎! 彼固為天下之大慮也; X 4, 11.

57 X 1, 12.

of knowledge: after achieving one's own purpose, the final result of the process of education is still identical to what previous generations had already obtained. We have to be mature enough to get the meaning of the Classics, but not to find new principles, both for the future as well as for the current needs of the community.

Xunzi states this positively: the model of the sages is the first and last pattern of conduct. It guarantees the continuity and maintenance of civilization:

If each dawn begins a new day and each day a man begins anew, then how is it that there are states that have lasted a thousand years tranquilly through this? I say it is because the state is succeeded by a trustworthy model, itself a thousand years old.<sup>58</sup>

The biggest danger for the state is to break this continuity: “only when there is removal of a dynasty and the creation of new regulations are difficulties engendered”.<sup>59</sup> If introducing new laws and customs result in chaos, holding the ancient regulations surely implies harmony: in this respect the thought of Xunzi is very coherent and depends on the simple principle of the idealization of the past.

Let us now analyze this idealization in more detail. Since one “should model himself after the regulations of Shun and Yu”.<sup>60</sup> (re-)construction of those regulations is a key problem, not for historical research, because Xunzi (just like Mencius) is not interested in scrutinizing ancient historical sources (!), but rather for ethics and political philosophy. Xunzi upholds the Confucian tradition that Yao did not abdicate because of old age or infirmity, but gave the throne to Shun, acting on his morality.<sup>61</sup> However, when transmitting this story Xunzi does not mention *Tian* at all: it was just Yao's decision. He was able to do this because “his heart was filled with the purest pleasures” (so he was not attached to power) and he found that Shun was full of virtue, like he himself, which made him a proper candidate for succeeding the first human emperor. Hence, “Yao and Shun were the most expert in the whole world at teaching and transforming (the people)”.<sup>62</sup> They were heroes of the empire:<sup>63</sup> they govern so well that in their times robbers did not steal and thieves did not break in.<sup>64</sup> Yao and Shun promoted those with moral worth, so

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58 X 11,7.

59 X 18,19.

60 上則法舜禹之制; X 6, 9.

61 X 18,16–17.

62 堯舜至天下之善教化者也; X 18,26.

63 堯舜者天下之英也; X 18,26.

64 X 18,28.

the world was well ordered.<sup>65</sup> They honored the worthy in order to teach them.<sup>66</sup> Without initiating wars, they submitted other tribes.<sup>67</sup> They were loyal and honest,<sup>68</sup> returned good for good:

Such was the Way of Ancient Kings, and such is the foundation of the unity of mankind. It is the natural response of treating well what is good and of despising what is evil, out of which the principles of government necessarily grow and concerning which both antiquity and today are in total accord.<sup>69</sup>

This passage stresses that the rule of the ancient kings was not only benevolent, loyal, generous and so on, but also just: “Yu and Tang founded their conduct on morality and justice”.<sup>70</sup> With this explication of the ideal of ancient kings, Xunzi tries to express his own vision of making politics. For instance, while praising the system of the Qin state (which was, incidentally much more just than benevolent), he ends each sentence with the proclamation: “just as were *x* of antiquity”.<sup>71</sup> As we can see, Xunzi “uses the past” in very different ways. Some of them are purely rhetorical, e.g. in the sentence which states that even Yao and Shun could not have added more.<sup>72</sup> For this reason, Antonio Cua distinguished five kinds of use of the past in Xunzi: pedagogical, rhetorical, elucidative and evaluative (Cua 2005, 73–98).

### The Shadow of the Later Kings: Broken Unity of History

The distinctive feature of Xunzi’s idealization of the past is his effort to show that sages and ancient kings, albeit magnificent, were still people of the same nature as their subordinates, and thus like us:

All men possess one and the same nature (...) It is the same in the case of a Yu and in that of a Jie (...) Yao and Yu were not born wholly what they became, but rose up by transforming their old selves, brought them

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65 X 25, 2.

66 X 28, 3.

67 X 25, 2.

68 X 32, 1.

69 X 16, 4.

70 古者禹湯本義務信而天下治; X 16, 10.

71 X 16, 8. He repeats this four times, substituting into *x*: the people, the officers, the knights and the court.

72 X 9, 25.

to perfection through cultivation and conscious exertion, and only after first putting forth the utmost effort did they become complete.<sup>73</sup>

Ancient kings are not an unapproachable ideal: everyone could and should follow them, and this is possible because they already transformed their original nature in the same way as everyone ought to:

The man in the street can become a Yu (塗之人可以為禹), since it is possible for every man to understand the substance of humaneness, morality, the model of law, and rectitude (皆有可以知仁義法正).<sup>74</sup>

If kings are primarily “common people”, and the latter are also able to follow the path of the sage kings, then the appearance of eminent individuals in history is normal and regular, and one does not need to appeal to Heaven in order to explain their existence. Even without divine intervention, it is “statistically” certain that some of the people will follow the model: “In every generation there have been<sup>75</sup> individuals who were the proper man. If born in the present age, such a proper man would fix his mind on the way of the Ancients.”

This does not necessarily mean that people following the sages have the status of sages: they could simply follow their conduct in the belief that they have to do so, although it is hard to fully realize their principles or some of their regulations are difficult to understand. The ancient principles are present today first and foremost because they have been transmitted from father to son. This partially explains why Xunzi so stresses the role of education: because it has historical, and hence also political, impact:

The reason that the model of the Three Dynasties still exists even though they have perished is that officers and bureaucrats have meticulously observed the rules and laws, the weights and measures, criminal sanctions and penalties, and maps and registers. This has been accomplished even when they no longer understood the meaning because they conscientiously safeguarded the calculations and out of prudence never presumed either to increase or diminish them. Rather, they handed them from father to son in order to aid the king or duke.<sup>76</sup>

73 X 4, 10.

74 X 23, 20.

75 彼或蓄積而得之者不世絕。彼其人者，生乎今之世，而志乎古之道；X 12, 5. Literally: “none of the generations is an exception” (不世絕).

76 X 4, 8.

This kind of reflection leads Xunzi to the fundamental statement about the unity of history—past and present are not separate dimensions, guided by different principles: “the beginnings of Heaven and Earth are still present today. And the way of all True Kings is in that of the Later Kings”.<sup>77</sup> As a result, Xunzi criticizes those who claim that it is impossible to follow rules of the past in present times: “fools say: the circumstances of the past and the present are quite different, and the Way by which to bring order to the anarchy of today must be different”.<sup>78</sup> Those words should have a galvanizing effect on those who have tendency to classify Xunzi as proto-, semi- or krypto-Legalist: they stand in stark contrast with remarks of Gongsun Yang. In *Book of Lord Shang* (商君書 *Shangjunshu*) we can read that if sage “were to imitate antiquity, he would be behind the times (法古則後於時)” and that is the reason why “the Zhou dynasty did not imitate the Shang dynasty, nor did the Xia dynasty imitate the period of Yu” (chapter 7, Shang and Duyvendak 2011, 117). Xunzi does not agree with the premise, i.e. that the Three Dynasties followed different principles, and thus largely denies the “category mistake” of being behind the current times:

The sage uses men to measure men, circumstances to gauge circumstances, each class of thing to measure that class, the persuasion to measure the achievement, and the Way to observe the totality, so that for him the ancient and modern are one and the same (以道觀盡, 古今一也). Things of the same class do not become contradictory even though a long time has elapsed because they share an identical principle of order (類不悖, 雖久同理).<sup>79</sup>

Because different epochs share the same principles and can be further used as a gauge of proper conduct, they also provide us with negative criterion: every doctrine that is neither consistent with ancient kings nor in accord with the requirements of ritual and moral principles is properly described as a treacherous doctrine.<sup>80</sup> On the other hand, theories which were not created by ancient kings but are falsely attributed to them and called “ancient,” are pernicious as well, just like theory of Five Phases (五行), pretending to be ancient.<sup>81</sup>

But Xunzi is not naïve, and he sees the difference between the ancient times and his own, on the epistemological rather than ontological and ethical levels. Despite

77 天地始者,今日是也。百王之道,後王是也; X 3, 10.

78 夫妄人曰:古今異情,其所以治亂者異道; X 5, 7.

79 X 5, 7.

80 凡言不合先王,不順禮義,謂之姦言; X 5, 8.

81 X 6, 7.

the unity of principles (ethics) and belonging to one category of events (ontology), the third subject of comparison, that is knowledge of the past, is not the same in both cases: the ancients knew more of their times than we know about them now, and this is obvious. Moreover, the more ancient the times, the less we know about them: “for Yu and Tang there are traditions concerning their government, but they cannot be ascertained with the detail of those for the Zhou dynasty”.<sup>82</sup> This does not mean that Xunzi looks for historical truth (“what really happened”), different from moral principles, because—let me put it in this way—moral truth is what really happened: “that before the Five Ancestors there are no traditions concerning individuals is not because of the absence of sages during that time, but because of the extreme antiquity of the period”.<sup>83</sup> The blurred and almost inaccessible truth here is that the model of the sages (a particular set of values) had been existing even before the first such sages were mentioned. The epistemological difference between former and later kings does not make Xunzi suspect that we know very little about ancient principles: the moral unity of history is the indisputable truth (or dogma). It is so even though we do not know why antiquity and our own times constitute one totality.<sup>84</sup> The distinction between former and later kings has normative implications: since the principles of early and late antiquity are identical, but those of late antiquity are more accessible for us, we should follow the principles of later kings:

Hence I say: If you want to observe the footprints of the sage kings, you must look where they are most clearly preserved—that is, with the Later Kings. These Later Kings were lords over the whole world. To put them aside and to discuss instead extreme antiquity is like giving up your own lord and serving another.<sup>85</sup>

From this point of view, Xunzi condemns those philosophers who follow the ancient kings only in a fragmentary manner, such as Mencius, who sees no difference between our knowledge of the ways of former and later kings.<sup>86</sup> One should not listen to the doctrines of those philosophical schools which do not follow the way of later kings.<sup>87</sup> Those following the model of former kings are called vulgar Confucians/*ru* (俗儒 *su ru*), while those following the model of later kings but

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82 X 5,7.

83 X 5,7.

84 古今之所一也，未有知其所由來者也；X 19, 23.

85 X 5,6.

86 X 6,7.

87 百家之說不及後王，則不聽也；X 8, 27.

not knowing why they should do so are called cultivated *ru* (雅儒 *ya ru*), and finally there who are great *ru* (大儒 *da ru*) are intentionally modeling themselves on the later Kings.<sup>88</sup> Interestingly enough, in this passage it is said the lesser *ru* give priority to the *Book of Songs* and so on, and not to the rituals. While learning of the Classics is vital for Xunzi, as we have already seen analyzing his concept of the moral use of the past and learning histories, it is rituals alone that are placed at “the top”. Just like in the case of former/later kings, Xunzi presents his own preferences without interrupting the main unity.

### Decay of the Historical Agency of Heaven

However, the biggest difference between Xunzi’s philosophy of history and the view of history held by other Confucians, and Mencius in particular, does not lie in prioritizing rituals over the Classics, or even later kings over the former ones, but rather in the lack of any concept of the Mandate of Heaven (and hence historical cycles). The seventeenth chapter of Xunzi’s collected works directly elaborates on this topic. The idea of *Tianming* is built upon the variations that the will of Heaven undergoes: when ruler is benevolent and follows the way of the ancients, Heaven is “tranquil”, while it responds to disruption and inappropriate conduct by withdrawal of its Mandate, resulting in civil war, floods, earthquakes, and other disasters. Xunzi denies the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven by denying its very premise: “the course of Nature is constant: it does not survive because of actions of Yao; it does not perish because of the actions of Jie”.<sup>89</sup> Regardless of the moral or immoral conduct of rulers, *Tian* has never changed its course and intervened in history, in other words: it has never been a historical agent, rather the background to all historical actions. Consequently, only people are “history-makers”: “since Yu achieved order and Jie brought chaos, order and chaos are not due to Heaven”.<sup>90</sup> In Xunzi’s thought, people are fully responsible for history: if they became sages (since Yu and others were originally like men in the street), it is due to their own effort.

If the way of Heaven is constant, it is also understandable and rational: what are perceived as miracles or unique events can thus be explained rationally: “these are unusual events that occur because of a modification of the relation of Heaven and Earth or a transmutation of the Yin and Yang”.<sup>91</sup> For such a methodical mind like

88 X 8, 21.

89 天行有常，不為堯存，不為桀亡；X 17, 1.

90 禹以治，桀以亂；治亂非天也；X 17, 6.

91 是天地之變，陰陽之化；X 17, 7.

that of Xunzi, the rationality of nature implies certain conclusions concerning how it is used. As he puts it in his famous poem, “how can obeying Heaven and singing in hymn of praise be better than regulating what Heaven has mandated and using it?”<sup>92</sup> The contrast between the preexisting and arbitrary Mandate of Heaven in classical Confucian thought (from *Book of Documents* up to *Mencius*) and Xunzi’s rationally recognizable yet useable Mandate of Nature is clear and distinct. The question of how to use Nature was therefore very important for his philosophy of history. All kings have to be, first of all, as constant in their conduct as Heaven, and this is achieved by modeling themselves on *Tian* and positively following the way of the ancients.<sup>93</sup>

Secondly, they have to use nature for moral and political purposes, and in this respect follow the way of ancient kings. We have to stress that although Xunzi refutes the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven, he still agrees with the statement that sages became sages and played roles in history because they understood decrees of *Tian*. From his viewpoint they successfully employed nature in order to prevent chaos. In other words, the ancient kings regulated nature,<sup>94</sup> and continued those regulations in their own conduct:

Heaven and Earth have completed their changes, the four seasons have come full circle, and everything under the canopy of heaven has begun anew. Thus, the Ancient Kings based themselves on this and used it for their pattern.<sup>95</sup>

By “transformation of nature” there is meant not only the natural world, but also people’s nature. Sages transform original nature, both their own and that of other people; the tools used for transformation of one’s own nature are rituals and moral duties, which form a basis for the system of laws and standards—in this way the whole system of rituals and laws was created by sages who transformed nature.<sup>96</sup> The sage’s relation to ritual and moral principles is like that of the potter to his pots.<sup>97</sup> In other words, culture was made by ancient kings by means of transforming nature. The reason for the transformation of human nature was that it was originally evil:

92 從天而頌之，孰與制天命而用之；X 17,15.

93 X 17, 9.

94 X 19,27.

95 X 19,28.

96 故聖人化性而起偽，偽起而生禮義，禮義生而制法度；然則禮義法度者，是聖人之所生也；X 23, 9.

97 X 23, 8.

In antiquity the sage kings took man's nature to be evil, to be inclined to prejudice and prone to error, to be perverse and rebellious, and not to be upright or orderly. For this reason they invented ritual principles and precepts of moral duty.<sup>98</sup>

Those precepts also embraced music, established to harmonize the people: "ancient kings guided the people with ritual and music, and the people became harmonious and friendly".<sup>99</sup> Later kings established proper names,<sup>100</sup> but they have been neglected since the last sages passed away.<sup>101</sup> As a result, the rituals and principles employed by kings indicate the causes of anarchy in the world.<sup>102</sup> And this is how we revert to the theme of learning from history and idealization of the past.

## Conclusion

Without any doubt, both Mencius and Xunzi offered different yet comprehensive concepts of history, falling within the ambit of Confucianism. The biggest difference between their views concerns the way of interpreting *Tian* and its relation to human history. For Mencius, Heaven is a powerful, if not the only, ultimate historical agent, giving and withdrawing its Mandate and by means of the course of things revealing its mysterious will. For Xunzi, *Tian* is rather a synonym for "nature", constant in its course and understandable in its transformations (not decisions!), and in this way employed by sages and "prolonged" in rituals. As such, Xunzi did not refute the concept of *Tianming*, but modified it in such a way that *Tian* became the background of history and not its backroom. The second bone of contention is an issue of former and later kings. In fact, Mencius sees no difference between the former and later sages (先聖後聖, 其揆一也). All of them realized and applied one and the same principle, namely *ren*. History is only a repetitive process of individuals respecting or disrespecting benevolence. In this sense, Mengzi's philosophy of history is in the end ahistorical, since it denies any historical change, regarding each cycle as reincarnation of the previous period and reducing human agency to a passive response to the will of Heaven.<sup>103</sup> Xunzi, on the other hand, is fully aware of the historicity of history: he made a distinction between *xianwang* and *houwang*

98 X 23, 2.

99 王導之以禮樂, 而民和睦; X 20, 6.

100 後王之成名; X 22, 1.

101 今聖王沒, 名守慢; X 22, 3.

102 先王以禮義表天下之亂; X 27, 12.

103 This approach was later accepted and deepened by Dong Zhongshu, (cf. Ng 2005, 195: 61).

not because of different principles guiding their lives, but due to limitations of our knowledge of the past and practical difficulty of following those who had lived far before the last recognized and remembered sage kings. It is intriguing that the supposedly “ahistorical” Mencius insisted on talking about historical cycles, whereas Xunzi has no criterion to distinguish them, since *Tian* acts regularly and all unusual events can be explained. Last but not least, we have to mention different preferences of both thinkers. Although as faithful Confucians they stress the historical role of both morality and rituals, one could readily notice that *ren* plays a central role in the Mencian philosophy of history, which has little interest in rituals, while Xunzi’s case is the reverse. For the latter, those Confucians who set something above the rituals cannot be called “great *ru*”. This point of debate has its source in basic assumptions of those thinkers: benevolence is a response to Heaven’s calling (Mencius), and rituals result from the transformation of nature (Xunzi).

If this is so, we can ask what makes their views of history Confucian in the final result? First of all, it is the moral use of the past. One has to follow the principles of the sages, repeat their rituals and read the Classics: the exact order in which these actions should be done thus seems to be an internal dispute. The rationale for learning from history is of course the idealization of the past, and in the case of both thinkers the Zhou times in particular.<sup>104</sup> Both philosophers repeat the same structures and legends, both of them put their own beliefs into the mouths of the legendary emperors Yao and Shun. As a result, both Mencius and Xunzi were proponents of the fundamental unity of the past and present (古今一也), and perceived history as history only owing to everlasting principles, guiding kings’ conduct from the beginnings up until today (to varying degrees). Those degrees made them not only idealize the past, but also criticize the present, creating the image of the gradual decline of the principles of the sages. They intended a return to this state and not to search for anything new: the issue of whether we should return to Yao and Shun or to the later kings<sup>105</sup> seems not to be, again, a matter of utmost importance. The collapse of the world of the sages and critique of the present times make learning from history an urgent and necessary task, while the unity of history and idealization of the past makes this mission possible. This fundamental view was common and untouched in the thought of Mencius and Xunzi, despite all of the differences between them, showing once again that the core of Confucianism lies not in metaphysics or epistemology, but in the field of ethics. The sub-field of the ethics of history cannot change this principle, which was established in the dim and distant past.

104 Daoists derived their genealogy from Yellow Emperor, Mozi claimed to follow the Xia dynasty and Legalists called for searching for new principles, associating with the Qin dynasty.

105 復後王; X 25,1.

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