

Xunzi's "Theory of Inherent Evil in Human Nature": An Analysis of Human Nature in Early Chinese Confucianism

Wenjie Zhang

School of Humanity and New Media, Yangtze University, Jingzhou, Hubei, China

Abstract

As a synthesizer of pre-Qin Confucian thought, Xunzi's "theory of innate human evil" breaks through the traditional Confucian framework of understanding human nature, constructing a dialectical view of humanity centered on "transforming nature through conscious exertion" (*hua xing qi wei*). Through textual analysis and comparative intellectual history, this paper systematically elucidates the theoretical core of Xunzi's "theory of innate human evil": while human nature inherently tends toward self-interest and harm avoidance, ethical order can be reshaped through ritual-legal education (*li fa jiao hua*) and moral practice, thereby achieving the "distinction between innate nature and cultivated artifice" (*xing wei zhi fen*). The study argues that Xunzi, taking "innate evil" as his logical starting point, proposes a governance path integrating rites and laws. This approach not only provided an ideological solution for social integration during the late Warring States period but also expanded the practical dimensions of Confucianism through critical inheritance of the doctrines of Confucius and Mencius. His theory laid the foundation for ancient Chinese ethical systems, profoundly influencing the "outer governance" (*wai wang*) tradition and contemporary reflections on human nature.

Keywords

Xunzi; theory of innate human evil; transforming nature through conscious exertion (*hua xing qi wei*); ritual-legal education (*li fa jiao hua*); Confucian thought.

1. Introduction

Xunzi (c. 313–238 BCE), a pivotal Confucian thinker of the late Warring States period, served three times as the chancellor of the Jixia Academy in the state of Qi. His philosophy synthesized Confucian and Legalist principles, advocating for the integration of "rites and laws" (*li fa jianshi*) and the balanced use of "kingly virtue and hegemonic power" (*wang ba bingyong*). Confronting the social chaos of his era—marked by feudal wars, moral decay, and the collapse of ritual order—Xunzi proposed the provocative thesis that "human nature is inherently evil; what is good arises from conscious artifice" (*ren zhi xing e, qi shan zhe wei ye*). This assertion fundamentally challenged Mencius's mainstream doctrine of "innate human goodness" (*xing shan lun*), redefining human nature as rooted in primal desires and emphasizing the decisive role of acquired education in moral cultivation. Existing scholarship has often framed Xunzi's "theory of innate human evil" (*xing e lun*) in opposition to orthodox Confucianism, overlooking its intrinsic practical logic. This paper contends that the essence of Xunzi's theory lies in its dialectical framework of "distinguishing innate nature from cultivated artifice" (*xing wei zhi fen*). By mediating between natural instincts and social norms through ritual-legal institutions, Xunzi expanded individual moral cultivation into a blueprint for sociopolitical governance. Drawing on core texts such as *Xing E* (On Human Nature), *Li Lun* (Discourse on Ritual), and *Quan Xue* (Encouraging Learning), and contextualizing his thought within the historical turbulence of the late Warring States period, this study systematically elucidates the theoretical depth of "transforming nature through conscious exertion" (*hua xing qi wei*). It further reveals the profound impact of Xunzi's ideas on the Confucian ethical system and the formation of

China's "ritual-legal state" (*li fa guojia*) model, ultimately re-evaluating the enduring theoretical value of his philosophy.

2. Literature Review

Academic research on Xunzi's "theory of innate human evil" (*xing e lun*) has evolved over a century, forming a multidimensional interpretive framework. Early domestic studies focused on the oppositional structure between Xunzi's and Mencius's theories of human nature. Liang Qichao pioneered the "complementarity thesis," arguing that Xunzi's "theory of innate human evil," grounded in "natural desires," and Mencius's "theory of innate human goodness" (*xing shan lun*) together constitute the practical foundation of Confucian ethics.^[1] Feng Youlan further elucidated the core of Xunzi's thought through the concept of "transforming nature through conscious exertion" (*hua xing qi wei*), emphasizing the corrective function of rites and laws (*li fa*) in restraining innate tendencies.^[2]

With shifts in academic paradigms, Li Zehou transcended the binary opposition framework by reconstructing "innate human evil" as a "theory of natural humanity" (*ziran renxing lun*). He highlighted Xunzi's governance logic, which harmonizes natural instincts with social order through the integration of rites and laws.^[3] Chen Lai advanced a "dynamic ethical perspective," proposing that moral education (*jiao hua*) mediates the tension between desires and ethics, thereby transforming Confucianism from idealism to institutional pragmatism.^[4] Liao Mingchun clarified that Xunzi's notion of "nature" (*xing*) refers to innate instincts, while "artifice" (*wei*) denotes acquired cultivation, asserting their dialectical unity.^[5] Liang Tao further argued that Xunzi's theory is not a simplistic advocacy of "innate evil" but a nuanced structure of "evil nature with a good heart" (*xing e xin shan*), emphasizing the practical potential of moral agency.^[6] Wang Yi and Guan Zhangmei analyzed the practical pathways of "transforming nature through conscious exertion" from the perspective of moral cultivation, underscoring the synergy between "learning" (*xue*) and "action" (*xing*) in Xunzi's thought.^[7]

In Western Sinology, comparative philosophical approaches dominate. Philip J. Ivanhoe juxtaposed Xunzi with Hobbes, noting their shared premise of "human self-interest" but distinguishing Xunzi's emphasis on ritual-legal education in shaping collective ethics over coercive authority.^[8] Roger T. Ames, through a process-philosophical lens, aligned Xunzi's concept of *wei* (artifice) with John Dewey's theory of "habit formation," revealing parallels in their views on ethical praxis.^[9] Bryan W. Van Norden critiqued the potential "moral vacuum" in Xunzi's political philosophy as it assimilated Legalist governance principles.^[10] Edward Slingerland employed cognitive science to reinterpret *hua xing qi wei* as a "cultural adaptation mechanism," correlating it with social psychological theories of habitual behavior.^[11]

3. Cognition of Human Nature and Observations on Good and Evil

3.1. Theoretical Framework and Core Proposition of Xunzi's Theory of Human Nature

Xunzi's approach to understanding human nature diverges significantly from other Confucian thinkers. He prioritized analytical reasoning and logical deduction, emphasizing a rigorous investigation into the essence of humanity. In his *Xing E* (On Human Nature), he states: "Human nature is inborn from Heaven... It cannot be learned or acquired through effort; what exists inherently in humans is called 'nature'". This definition starkly contrasts with Mencius's *xing shan lun* (theory of innate human goodness), which posits moral potential as the essence of human nature. For Xunzi, morality is a product of acquired cultivation, not an innate endowment. In *Zheng Ming* (Rectifying Names), he further clarifies: "What is unlearned and spontaneous is called 'nature'". This underscores that Xunzi's conception of *xing* (nature) refers

to humanity's primal instincts—innate tendencies toward self-interest and harm avoidance. As Liao Mingchun notes, such instincts are neither replaceable by human artifice (*wei*) nor divorced from it; rather, they serve as the raw material for ethical transformation.^[5]

The opening line of *Xing E*—“*Human nature is inherently evil; what is good arises from conscious artifice*”—encapsulates the core of Xunzi's theory. His claim of *xing e* (innate evil) does not imply total depravity but warns that unrestrained natural desires inevitably lead to social conflict and disorder. By centering moral practice on external education rather than “inner expansion” (as in Mencius), Xunzi reoriented Confucian ethics toward pragmatic governance.

3.2. Historical Misinterpretations and Theoretical Refinement

Historically, thinkers often misread Xunzi's *xing e lun*. Criticisms such as “*Xunzi's theory is extreme; the mere assertion of 'innate evil' undermines its foundation*”^[12] or “*There is no need to engage with Xunzi—focus instead on Mencius's 'innate goodness'*”^[13] reflect a shallow interpretation of his nuanced argument. Revisiting *Xing E*'s thesis, it becomes clear that Xunzi sought not to vilify human nature but to establish a dialectic between *xing* (nature) and *wei* (artifice). As seen in chapters like *Li Lun* (Discourse on Ritual) and *Quan Xue* (Encouraging Learning), Xunzi acknowledges humanity's latent capacity for moral growth: “*Humans possess the potential to comprehend benevolence, righteousness, and laws, as well as the means to enact them*”. Thus, as Liang Tao argues, Xunzi should not be labeled a mere “proponent of innate evil” but rather a “theorist of ethical artifice” (*shan wei lun*) or even a “neutralist” who views nature as neither inherently good nor evil.^[6] The transformative power of *wei*—deliberate cultivation through rites, laws, and education—remains the cornerstone of his philosophy.

4. Innate Human Evil and Ethical Transformation

Xunzi posits that human nature is inherently inclined toward “evil” due to primal impulses rooted in self-interest and sensory desires. He argues that without external constraints and moral cultivation, individuals would inevitably descend into conflict and chaos. In *Xing E* (On Human Nature), he states: “*Humans are born with a fondness for profit... with envy and hatred... and with desires of the eyes and ears*”. These innate tendencies, while not inherently immoral, become sources of ethical discord if left unchecked. Thus, Xunzi emphasizes “*transforming nature through conscious exertion*” (*hua xing qi wei*), where “*wei*” (conscious artifice) refers to the deliberate effort to reshape innate impulses into socially sanctioned virtues.

4.1. Mechanisms of Ethical Transformation: Hua Xing Qi Wei

The mechanism of *hua xing qi wei* hinges on three interrelated strategies:

1. Ritual-Legal Education (*li fa jiao hua*): Xunzi asserts that rituals (*li*) and laws (*fa*) serve as external frameworks to guide behavior. In *Li Lun* (Discourse on Ritual), he writes: “Without innate nature, artifice would lack material to act upon; without artifice, nature could never beautify itself”. Rituals instill moral habits, while laws deter harmful conduct, collectively molding raw human instincts into ethical dispositions.

2. Self-Cultivation Through Learning: Xunzi elevates education as the cornerstone of moral transformation. In *Quan Xue* (Encouraging Learning), he declares: “Human nature lacks ritual principles; thus, one must study to acquire them... Nature does not inherently know ritual principles; thus, one must reflect to understand them”. Through relentless study and introspection, individuals internalize ethical norms, gradually replacing instinctual drives with cultivated virtues.

3. Practice and Habituation: Ethical knowledge, for Xunzi, must translate into action. In *Ru Xiao* (The Teachings of the Ru), he states: “Knowing is not as good as doing”. Moral principles become ingrained only through repetitive practice, transforming abstract ideals into reflexive behaviors.

Edward Slingerland analogizes this process to “cultural adaptation,” where ritualized actions reshape innate tendencies into socially coherent habits.^[11]

4.2. Potential for Ethical Transformation and Transcending Fatalism

Xunzi’s optimism lies in his belief that all humans possess the *potential* for ethical transformation. As he notes in *Xing E*: “Every person on the street has the capacity to become a sage like Yu... Though not all may achieve it, none are barred from striving”. This potential is grounded in humanity’s unique ability to comprehend and enact moral norms—a distinction separating humans from animals. Philip J. Ivanhoe observes that while Xunzi shares Hobbes’s premise of self-interested human nature, he diverges by prioritizing communal ethics shaped by education over coercive authority.^[8]

Ultimately, Xunzi’s theory transcends fatalism. By framing morality as a dynamic interplay between innate tendencies and conscious effort, he offers a pragmatic path to ethical progress—one that acknowledges human frailty while affirming the transformative power of culture and discipline.

5. Ethical Reconstruction and Sociopolitical Governance

Xunzi’s advocacy for the “theory of innate human evil” (*xing e lun*) emerged as a direct response to the sociopolitical turmoil of the late Warring States period (475–221 BCE). During this era, incessant warfare among feudal states—epitomized by the phrase “*contending for land, they fill fields with corpses; contending for cities, they fill streets with blood*”^[14]—exposed the destructive consequences of unbridled human desires. Xunzi identified unrestrained self-interest as a root cause of societal collapse and sought to address it through a dual strategy of ethical reconstruction and institutional governance.

5.1. Ritual-Legal Systems as Ethical Frameworks

Xunzi posited that natural human inclinations, while inherently self-serving, could be redirected toward social harmony through the imposition of *li* (rituals) and *fa* (laws). In *Li Lun* (Discourse in Ritual), he argues: “*Rituals arise from the need to nourish human desires... They distinguish boundaries, eliminate strife, and nurture collective flourishing*”. Rituals, in this context, function as codified moral norms that cultivate virtuous habits, while laws serve as coercive mechanisms to deter harmful behaviors. This “*integration of rites and laws*” (*li fa jianshi*) formed the backbone of Xunzi’s governance model, bridging individual morality with statecraft.

5.2. From Moral Idealism to Institutional Pragmatism

Unlike Mencius, who grounded ethics in innate moral potential, Xunzi shifted Confucianism toward a pragmatic focus on cultivated order. Chen Lai observes that Xunzi’s “*dynamic ethical perspective*” transformed Confucian thought from abstract idealism into a blueprint for institutional design.^[4] For instance, the Han Dynasty scholar Dong Zhongshu later adopted Xunzi’s insights in his “*three grades of human nature*” (*xing san pin shuo*), which stratified individuals based on their capacity for moral improvement and justified hierarchical governance.^[6]

5.3. Balancing Freedom and Constraint

Xunzi’s theory acknowledges the tension between individual autonomy and social stability. While he affirmed the inevitability of human desires, he insisted that “*moral norms are corrective measures imposed by society upon innate nature*”.^[15] This necessitated a delicate equilibrium: institutions must restrain destructive impulses without stifling human agency. Philip J. Ivanhoe draws parallels between Xunzi and Hobbes, noting both philosophers’ emphasis on governance to curb chaos. However, Xunzi diverges by prioritizing moral

education over punitive control, envisioning a society where ritualized practices (*wei*) gradually internalize ethical norms.^[8]

5.4. Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

Xunzi's ideas laid the groundwork for China's "ritual-legal state" (*li fa guojia*), a governance model that endured through imperial dynasties. His dialectical approach—"natural instincts provide the raw material; conscious artifice shapes them into virtue"—resonates with modern discourses on cultural conditioning and behavioral ethics. Edward Slingerland's cognitive interpretation frames *hua xing qi wei* as a "cultural adaptation mechanism" akin to social psychology's "habit formation" theories, underscoring its interdisciplinary relevance.^[11]

In contemporary contexts, Xunzi's thought offers dual insights:

1. Institutional Design: Legal and educational systems must account for human fallibility, employing both guidance and restraint.
2. Moral Cultivation: Ethical behavior arises not from innate purity but from disciplined practice—a notion echoed in John Dewey's pragmatism.^[9]

By reconciling realism with idealism, Xunzi's *xing e lun* remains a vital framework for understanding the interplay between human nature, ethics, and governance.

6. Conclusion

Xunzi's "theory of innate human evil" (*xing e lun*) achieves theoretical breakthrough through its dialectical duality: it acknowledges the objective existence of humanity's natural instincts while asserting the transformative potential of ritual-legal education (*li fa jiao hua*). This dynamic view of human nature dismantles the traditional Confucian binary of "good versus evil," constructing instead a practical ethical system grounded in the interplay between nature and artifice (*xing wei hudong*). From a historical perspective, Xunzi's concept of "transforming nature through conscious exertion" (*hua xing qi wei*) reoriented Confucianism from the moral idealism of Confucius and Mencius toward actionable governance strategies. His synthesis of rites and laws (*li fa jianshi*) provided a theoretical prototype for the institutional foundations of the Qin and Han empires. As Li Zehou notes, this "unity of natural instincts and social order" enabled Confucian ethics to transcend the limitations of clan-based morality, evolving into a universal framework for societal regulation.^[3]

6.1. Methodological Innovations

Xunzi's theory exhibits a distinctive practical rationality. By framing morality through the lens of "distinguishing nature from artifice" (*xing wei zhi fen*), he transforms abstract ethical principles into quantifiable processes of self-cultivation. The incremental path of "accumulating goodness to attain virtue" (*ji shan cheng de*), as outlined in *Quan Xue* (Encouraging Learning), concretizes moral ideals into behavioral norms. This "praxis-oriented tradition" (*gongfu lun*) profoundly influenced later Confucian movements, notably the Neo-Confucian doctrine of "investigating things to extend knowledge" (*gewu zhizhi*) advocated by Zhu Xi, who echoed Xunzi's caution against unrestrained desires in his maxim "preserve Heavenly Principle, eliminate human desires" (*cun tianli, mie renyu*).^[2]

Crucially, Xunzi avoids moral determinism. In *Jie Bi* (Dispelling Obsessions), he asserts: "The mind is the ruler of the body", emphasizing the agency of conscious intent in ethical practice. This "evil nature with a good heart" (*xing e xin shan*) framework introduces a nuanced dimension to Confucian theories of mind and nature, bridging innate tendencies with moral aspiration.

6.2. Theoretical Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

Xunzi's *xing e lun* remains a philosophy of profound intellectual depth and enduring influence. By foregrounding the complexity of human nature and the role of cultural conditioning, his ideas provided theoretical underpinnings for the structural development of social morality in ancient China. The “constructive tension” in his thought—combining a sober recognition of human frailty with confidence in ethical progress—offers a “realist idealism” that continues to resonate.

In modern contexts, Xunzi's insights illuminate debates on:

1. Human-Society Dynamics: How institutions can balance individual autonomy with collective welfare.
2. Cultural Adaptation: The mechanisms by which ethical norms are internalized through practice, as explored in Slingerland's cognitive studies.[11]
3. Moral Education: The necessity of integrating habituation (Dewey's “habit formation”) with rational discourse.[9]

While Xunzi's theory has limitations—such as its potential over-reliance on external norms—its capacity to harmonize realism and idealism solidifies its position as a critical nexus between Confucian “inner *sageliness*” (*nei sheng*) and “outer governance” (*wai wang*). As a philosophical legacy, it continues to inform contemporary reflections on human nature, ethical practice, and the challenges of civilizational transformation.

Acknowledgements

Thank you, Professor Lu, for your diligent guidance during the thesis revision phase, especially for the critical suggestions on literature organization and theoretical refinement. Your support has enabled the successful publication of the paper, and I am deeply grateful!

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