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XUNZI’S MORAL ANALYSIS OF WAR AND SOME OF ITS CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS

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The early Ru or ‘Confucian’ figure Xunzi (‘Master Xun,’ c. 310–c. 220 BCE) gives a sophisticated analysis of war, which he develops on the basis of a larger social and political vision that he works out in considerable detail. This larger vision of human society is thoroughly normative in the sense that Xunzi both argues for the value of his ideal conception of society, and relates these moral arguments for the Confucian Dao or Way to what I take to be fairly hardheaded assessments of the dynamics of international relations in his late Warring States historical context. This combination of moral vision and political realism, combined with his advocacy of strong political authorities that nevertheless rule justly in service to the common good, makes his thought arguably more relevant to the contemporary world of contending nation-states, and a rising, undemocratic China, than any other pre-modern Confucian. Xunzi’s own context, both intellectual and political/military, led him to argue about war in ways that look distinctive to contemporary Western ethicists — and yet his preferred issues are revealing in themselves and are suggestive in relation to current debates in military ethics. In the first part of this paper I analyze Xunzi’s argumentative strategy in debate about war, where he chooses to attack his adversaries on the question of how to cultivate true loyalty and obedience in subordinates. The second part briefly explores Xunzi’s vision of the good society and how it fits into a multi-state world, which undergirds his critique of alternate discourses about war and government. The third examines the Xunzian vision of politics and war as a source for a contemporary Confucian theory of civilian-military relations. The fourth section explores some implications of a Xunzian account for international relations, through a brief comparison with the Kantian notion of ‘perpetual peace’ among liberal states, and whether such ‘zones of peace’ might be conceivable on Confucian grounds. The conclusion reflects on the ambiguous legacy of Xunzi’s moralism in his analysis of war and statecraft, and the possible light this shines on contemporary Chinese political culture.

KEY WORDS: Confucianism, Xunzi, just war, just authority, political theory, loyalty

1. Introduction

The early Ru or ‘Confucian’ figure Xunzi (‘Master Xun,’ c. 310–c. 220 BCE) gives a sophisticated analysis of war, which he develops on the basis of a larger social and political vision that he works out in considerable detail. This larger vision of human society is thoroughly normative in the sense that Xunzi both argues for the value of his ideal conception of society, and relates these moral arguments for the Confucian Dao or Way to what I take to be fairly hardheaded assessments of the dynamics of international relations...
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As Sumner B. Twiss and Jonathan Chan have shown, Xunzi and Mencius (i.e., Mengzi, 391–308 BCE), another early Confucian thinker, share a very similar account of justice in war (Twiss and Chan 2012). They both condemn aggressive wars for territorial expansion, but permit and even encourage wars of self-defense against aggression, and also what they call ‘punitive expeditions’ by rightfully authorized state actors to redress unjust attacks against other states. They also regulate, at least to some degree, the conduct of war, insisting, for instance, on immunity for non-combatants, limitations on destruction, and even something akin to proportionality in the choice of violent means to ends.

Twiss and Chan’s analysis is organized by traditional Western analyses of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, and is a dramatic and revealing advance over previous scholarship on early Confucian views of war. However, Mencius and Xunzi do not actually organize their discussions in terms of these concepts (regulations of just resort to war and just conduct while fighting a war). The Xunzi, in particular, includes an entire chapter on war, with the core of that chapter dramatizing a debate between Xunzi and the Linwu Lord, who articulates positions that were well known in late Warring States discourses on both war and statecraft.1

Xunzi’s own context, both intellectual and political/military, led him to argue about war in ways that look distinctive to contemporary Western ethicists – and yet his preferred issues are revealing in themselves and are suggestive in relation to current debates in military ethics. In the first part of this paper I analyze Xunzi’s argumentative strategy in debate about war, where he chooses to attack his adversaries on the question of how to cultivate true loyalty and obedience in subordinates. The second part briefly explores Xunzi’s vision of the good society and how it fits into a multi-state world, which undergirds his critique of alternate discourses about war and government. The third examines the Xunzian vision of politics and war as a source for a contemporary Confucian theory of civilian-military relations. The fourth section explores some implications of a Xunzian account for international relations, through a brief comparison with the Kantian notion of ‘perpetual peace’ among liberal states, and whether such ‘zones of peace’ might be conceivable on Confucian grounds. The conclusion reflects on the ambiguous legacy of Xunzi’s moralism in his analysis of war and statecraft, and the possible light this shines on contemporary Chinese political culture.

II. Xunzi’s argumentative strategy

Chapter 15 of the received Xunzi is entitled ‘Debating Warfare’.2 Roughly the first half of the chapter narrates a seemingly historical debate, although it is certainly re-told from the perspective of Xunzi’s school. The protagonists are Master Xun himself, and the Linwu Lord, ‘presumably a general’ (Xunzi 1988–1994, vol. 2, 211), before the lord’s likely employer, King Xiaocheng of Zhao (r. 265–244 BCE). Xunzi’s argumentative strategy in this debate is revealing, because it shows what he takes to be the decisive advantage of his sort of Confucianism over competing discourses often labeled as being ‘legalist’ or from the ‘military school’.

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The general borrows freely from military texts such as the *Sunzi Bingfa*, advocating timely exploitation of circumstantial advantages, shifting tactics so as to be unpredictable, and quick movements and dissimulation to catch opponents by surprise (15.1a–b). Perhaps surprisingly, Xunzi rejects this strategic and tactical tradition as badly limited in comparison to his own Confucian arts of government. Xunzi insists that the paramount issue in warfare is ‘unifying the people’ (15.1a, 15/68/7), which he explains in terms of both commoners and officers ‘being devoted’ (親附) to their leader, using a word (*qin* 親) ordinarily used to describe familial love and affection.

This is an intriguing but somewhat perplexing tack for Xunzi to take. On the one hand, he seems to dismiss the utility of the strategic tradition in ancient China, which continues to be of significant interest today to military thinkers all over the world. Instead he insists that the paramount issue in war is the loyalty and devotion of one’s troops, which he judges to be a fundamentally political and moral issue related to the quality of leadership in a state. Dissimulation, Xunzi argues, will only work against an undisciplined army. But if subordinates serve their superiors like sons serving their fathers, they will be so motivated to protect them and fight for them that it will be as if they are the hands of the body politic instinctively moving to protect the head or trunk from harm. Moreover, this strong loyalty and commitment will lead to excellent military discipline in battle, visible in orderly ranks and fierce commitment to whatever maneuvers are chosen by their general (15.1b). Despite the king’s and general’s shared and repeated verdict that Xunzi’s argumentation is excellent, a reader might be left wondering instead whether this chapter represents a painfully naive and moralistic take on the conduct of war. Is technical mastery of strategy, tactics, and fighting skills really unimportant? And what about actual military power, as manifest in numbers of troops, effective weaponry, etc.?

The historical and intellectual context helps explain why Xunzi argues as he does. Historically, perhaps the paramount political issue in Spring and Autumn (770–481 BCE) and Warring States (481–221 BCE) China was effective managerial control of supposed subordinates. Initially the problem manifested itself with the breakdown of Zhou dynasty ‘feudal’ loyalties, so that cadet lineages ceased to regard themselves as rightfully subject to central noble lineages, and repeatedly rebelled. As centralized, territorial states gradually emerged, rulers needed to find a way to have ministers and other civil servants who would remain loyal, rather than rebelling or treasonously aiding other contending states. As the causes of war moved from outright rebellion by subordinates to competing aggressive states, the need for loyal ministers and a compliant populace only became more urgent, since competitors for their allegiance were close at hand.

Numerous managerial strategies were discussed to try to solve this problem; Xunzi’s Confucianism was one among many. Another, at that time much more influential, discourse of control was classified retrospectively by Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) bibliographers as the school of methods/laws/models (*fa* 法), often rendered poorly in English as ‘legalism’. Among the variety within this tendency of thought, certain key themes recurred, such as using publicly promulgated laws to specify job responsibilities and rewards for good performance, and also to specify criminal offenses, such as desertion, which were generally met with harsh punishments such as amputation or death. Arguing in the mid-third century BCE, Xunzi views this tendency as a very serious threat and alternative to the Confucian Way, and as the driving force behind the ascension of the state of Qin, which was to eventually triumph militarily and unite ‘all under Heaven’.
In ‘Debating Warfare’, representatives of both the school of fa and the strategic or military tradition are present: the Linwu Lord seems well-schooled in strategic theory (15.1a–f), and Xunzi’s infamous student Li Si, later the prime minister of Qin, makes an appearance arguing against Xunzi in favor of Qin’s pragmatic, power-maximizing approach (15.3). Throughout this chapter and related parts of his text, Xunzi aims to discredit, or more precisely relativize the value of, both of these competing discourses of statecraft. Xunzi’s rhetorical challenge is to make the Confucian Way seem more effective, and not just more admirable, than strategic subtlety on the one hand, and proto-totalitarian social control on the other.

Xunzi himself picks loyalty and obedience as the grounds on which to press his case. Both kings and generals would recognize the importance of the theme; without obedient troops willing to fight for them, such leaders would quickly be killed. Xunzi’s argument is essentially as follows: ‘What is orderly [or ‘well-governed’] is strong, what is chaotic is weak’ (治者彊，亂者弱 (15/69/13–14, 15.1c). Good government, then, is the critical root of military strength. For Xunzi the core elements of good government are the Confucian virtues and practices of ritual, humaneness, and justice (15.1d). Where these values are primary, rulers and other superiors will be genuinely admired, with true loyalty motivating a deep commitment to follow their leadership – this happens, Xunzi thinks, because such leaders rule in a way that instantiates truly admirable values. Other dao have certain insights, such as the recognition that talented people must be elevated to greater responsibilities, and rewards and punishments must be dependable and significant enough to motivate compliance, but ideas such as these will corrupt the polity if they are made the pre-eminent guides to policy and conduct (15.1d).

The key problem seems to be that a philosophy that seeks to govern merely by rewarding and punishing, for no greater purpose than manipulation of the populace, will generate soldiers and officers who seek their own benefit above all. This will lead them to act in common only when it is in their personal interest to do so, and to continue fighting only so long as they calculate a reasonable chance of success for themselves. An army full of such people will be prone to deception and intrigues, and only act in common when it is clearly beneficial to each and every soldier (15.1d). This lack of true common purpose, combined with an ‘every man for himself’ outlook, means that when confronted with a force that cannot be swayed, tricked, or intimidated, mercenary armies of this sort will see their internal discipline break down, with commands ignored despite the promise of terrible penalties (15.4, 15.5). By contrast, the army of the humane man will, Xunzi thinks, be truly loyal to its leaders, and be sufficiently inspired by higher goods worth fighting for that its soldiers will be willing to die for them, and not just risk death in a calculated bid for personal profit (15.3, 15.5). This seems to be Xunzi’s key argument against running an army by means of a merely technical manipulation of human interests through rewards and punishments.

There is something quite right about this, at least in the sense that people do fight bravely because of loyalty to and even love for others. However, a critic might still object that Xunzi fails to consider power sufficiently when compared even to truly inspiring authority. If the armies of Qin were confident in victory against an over-matched foe, why would they not march on and conquer regardless of the attractive virtue of the opposition? Although some of Xunzi’s claims suggest he could be vulnerable to this sort of objection, a careful reading of the whole chapter shows his considered view is not so naive as the objection requires.
Xunzi’s position, it becomes clear, is that technical prowess in strategy and tactics is important, but it is the concern of specialists: the generals and officer corps, we might say, who have specific duties to oversee the army effectively (15.1c, 15.3). He even devotes a few paragraphs to giving his views on how to be a capable, conscientious general (15.1e), commends using strong and effective military technology and weapons (15.1c), and advocates judicious use of rewards and punishments (15.1c). But he insists that strong armor and eager soldiers, high walls and deep moats, and awesome commands and punishments will not by themselves ensure victory; only if these are in the service of the humane Confucian Way will they be truly effective (15.4). All of this suggests that Xunzi thinks military skill and technologies of war are truly important as instruments of power, but that they are somewhat overrated in his context. He wants to suggest that ruling justly and compassionately will help cultivate loyal, obedient, harmonized, and disciplined troops that are dramatically more effective with the same implements than mercenaries, let alone the terrified and starving populace that sometimes staffed Warring States armies (15.6a).

To sum up, then, Xunzi thinks that a good government is clearly the most powerful government, other things being equal, or at least not wildly unequal. Thus the most moral leader will, presuming he is competent and employs competent ministers and staffers, also be the strongest leader, with armies that are dramatically more capable of repelling invasion and projecting force into other territories when justified. While this argument is reasonably compelling in the context of military affairs, Xunzi clearly sees war as only one aspect of the larger problem of good government, which sets the full context for his advocacy of military activity as part of the Confucian Way. To see this larger picture, we need to briefly scan Xunzi’s broader account of the good society, which undergirds his account of kingly rule in military affairs.

III. Xunzi’s vision of the good society

To fully grasp the logic of Xunzi’s moral approach to politics and war, we need to step back and examine his views of society. Compared to other early Confucians, Xunzi writes a tremendous amount about governmental and economic policy, now visible in chapters with titles such as ‘Strengthening the State’, ‘Enriching the State’, ‘The Way of Ministers’, and ‘The Way of Lords’, as well as the more widely known ‘Regulations of a True King’. Living near the end of the Warring States period, he was able to learn from numerous administrative theorists of various philosophical orientations, some of whose views he synthesized into an overarching Confucian approach to social policy.

To summarize, Xunzi thinks the most critical point is that society must be morally ordered from top to bottom by the Confucian Way. The government needs to pursue just and humane policies (that is, instantiate ren 仁 and yi 義 as social practices), and the governing elite in particular need to be cemented together through their shared commitment to ritual propriety (li 禮). And if this is done properly, such a society will also become wealthy and powerful. Thus, according to Xunzi, the good society is not only the right one to build, it is also most desirable prudentially because it will lead to maximal satisfaction of human desires, within the constraints and possibilities of the natural world (19.1).

For Xunzi, morality is the primary factor in the ultimate success of a leader and his government. On his account, social justice (yi 義) requires that people be appointed to different offices and positions in accordance with their talents, moral virtue, and earnest
commitment to working hard, but not because of family connections (9.1, 9.3, 9.12, 11.5b, 12.9, 18.3, etc.). Thus justice prescribes a hierarchically ordered society with clear distinctions in status and responsibilities, and it also structures the obligations of all people to each other, due to their various relationships.\(^5\) It also requires that office holders be rewarded or penalized based on how well they fulfill their duties. Humaneness or benevolence (ren 仁) requires that the ruler and his officers work to benefit the people and help them to flourish (10.11). This can be accomplished through direct welfare for the weak and needy (9.1, 9.4), and through increasing productivity and gainful employment for everyone else by means of a number of measures: lowering tariffs to stimulate trade, ensuring public safety with effective criminal law, standardizing weights and measures across one’s territory, inspecting goods to ward off fraud, and encouraging specialization in various manufacturing and other trades (9.14, 10 passim). Beyond wise economic stewardship, the people should be treated well through some sort of minimal broad education (27.52), and provided the possibility for social advancement (or demotion) based on merit (9.1); in addition, rulers should refrain from excessive or untimely demands on them for military service or other corvée labor (10.10). Ritual, along with other arts like music, helps to harmonize people with each other, and adorn and strengthen their relationships, making life better for everyone, whether exalted or lowly (19 passim). These values make social life not just tolerable but meaningful, beautiful, and satisfying, and occasionally delightful, on Xunzi’s account.

This vision shows that Xunzi has effectively absorbed many of the universalizing administrative theories of competitors who were imagining a new empire, and attempted to humanize them, making them more responsive to human needs and desires, and not just to the need for centralized power in territorial states at war with each other. Thus he happily borrows themes such as ‘elevating the worthy’ (originally Mohist), and the use of explicit, delimited job descriptions with pay commensurate for performance (generally ‘legalist’). These techniques for efficient management are important, Xunzi thinks, and can be used on their own at least to a certain degree, but will only result in moderate stability for the state, turning a leader who relies on them alone into a ‘hegemon’ (ba 霸) but not a true ‘king’ (wang 王) (11 passim). But he thinks even this would be a dramatic improvement over many of the benighted states of his era, which are so poorly run as to court annihilation.

So according to Xunzi the characteristics of a good society are as follows: it is ordered by pursuit of the collective good, which is derivatively good for individuals, even the powerful and rich, far beyond what is possible in a Hobbesian war of all against all; the resulting inter-personal loyalty, hard work, and supportive, non-oppressive government lead to economic productivity and widespread wealth; this wealth and tightly knit community supports military strength; all of this makes a just society more powerful than its competitors. Military strength is thus the fruit of wise stewardship of the whole society, not just the army.

While such a state will obviously be a good place to live for its own populace, it will also, Xunzi thinks, be remarkably attractive to people living elsewhere. Such outside admirers will immigrate if they can, Xunzi thinks, and if the armies of such a good state arrive on a punitive expedition, they will be welcomed as liberators (see further discussion below in section V).

Thus a flourishing state will put pressure on neighboring states in mostly indirect but significant ways. It will not attack them, in accordance with Confucian strictures against
aggressive war. Despite this policy of forbearance, it will still serve as a deterrent to other leaders’ territorial ambitions. First, it will be an uninviting target itself, due to its military and political strength. Second, it will restrain inter-state predation to the extent that it actually engages in ‘punitive expeditions’ (usually zheng 征 or by extension zhu 誅) against aggressive states. The total effect of this, in a Xunzian world, is that flourishing states generate competitive pressure on lesser states even without direct attack, through trade and other economic incentives, attractive political/moral reputation, and military capacity. And if rulers of lesser states dared to attack others in an attempt to strengthen themselves, they would court their own destruction and annexation by the sage king next door, Xunzi thinks (15.1d).

Although it is beyond the bounds of this paper to fully explore and assess this, we should note that Xunzi’s social philosophy provides an intriguing counterpoint to what is often taken to be the dominant political consensus in the contemporary West. In contrast to our own commitments to democratic elections, liberal government, and capitalism, Xunzi articulates a society run by an authoritative, educated elite who work together ostensibly for the common good of everyone. While this could be caricatured as ‘central planning’, it seems closer to a kind of state-regulated capitalism, based on Xunzi’s account of the economy, one that makes no pretenses to ‘neutrality’ about the nature of the good for human beings, but instead works assiduously to cultivate its vision of a flourishing state and populace. In the rest of this paper, I attempt to extrapolate a neo-Xunzian response to certain contemporary issues related to war and peace, and throughout will draw on both Xunzi’s specific views about war, as well as the broader socio-political Way of which they are a part.

IV. Xunzi on Civilian-Military Relations

Xunzi’s understanding of society and international relations, including war, provides helpful sources for constructing a contemporary Confucian rationale for civilian control of the military. Although this is not a particularly controverted issue in the present day, exploring a Xunzian rationale for such an arrangement helps to bring out details of his views, as well as highlight important themes that can help us make reasonable extensions of his ideas to address contemporary issues.

As noted in Section II, Xunzi views generals and other military officers as having distinctive offices or roles within a larger government bureaucracy. Such roles or offices are each parts of the broader social matrix defined by justice. Holders of military offices are thus special cases of the general lord-minister relationship, which is hierarchical, with specific responsibilities defining each role, all of which is ordered by norms of justice (yi 義) (9.15, 9.17, 15.1c).

Xunzi, as with other early Confucians, sees society as a community of interrelated people who occupy a number of different positions, offices, and roles. Although a full consideration of comparative issues is beyond the scope of this paper, it is striking that the early Confucians view such relationships as essentially constitutive of persons. Thus social ‘roles’ on their account are not guises that actors might take up and put down at will, according to circumstances, and which do not deeply affect one’s inner ‘self’, that is, one’s enduring dispositions to think, feel, desire, and act in various ways. While the theatrical metaphor for roles in the West has taken a number of different forms over time, at least some, such as Montaigne, do see roles as ‘masks’ in this sense, covering over the self and
remaining quite distinct from it. In contrast to this, Xunzi sees people as participating in a
countless of relationships with others, including especially family relations but also
‘professional’ ones, some of which take place in the context of public offices with specific
duties, and all of which are essential components of our lives as social beings. While Xunzi
and other early Confucians recognize that familial and political relationships can come into
tension with each other, their aim is to order society in a harmonious way, so that people
can fulfill themselves within many different sorts of relationships, nested into a hierarchy
with family relations pre-eminent.

Different offices and roles require distinctive knowledge, virtues, skills, and activities,
on Xunzi’s account. Like Mencius, Xunzi believes whole-heartedly in a division of labor,
which allows people to specialize in various tasks and, with sufficient effort, master them
(e.g., 11.10). With regard to military officers, Xunzi clearly thinks they have specialized tasks,
responsibilities, and powers, as the ‘teeth and claws’ of the state (9.19b), and need to
become expert in techniques of strategy – precisely the methods he deems secondary in
debate with the Linwu Lord (15.1e). They need to be empowered and clearly directed, with
sufficient equipment and capable, loyal troops, all of which depends on the overall health
and strength of the state.

Xunzi is quite explicit about the need for loyalty and trust in relationships between
lord and minister, but he cautions that loyalty in particular can be misunderstood. In ‘The
Way of Ministers’, Xunzi distinguishes different degrees and types of service to one’s lord,
through a sequence of definitions of good and bad qualities and actions. Obedience, in
Xunzi’s view, is following one’s orders when they benefit the lord, but continuing to follow
orders when they will harm him is instead ‘toadying’. Amazingly, Xunzi defines ‘loyalty’ or
‘doing one’s utmost’ (zhong 忠) as contravening one’s explicit mandate in order to benefit
the lord. He then goes on to advocate ‘remonstrance’, which he defines as arguing with
one’s lord when his plans are misguided, but leaving if one’s advice is not heeded, and
even ‘wrangling’, which is doing this to the point where one ends up being executed by
the benighted lord. Truly good and loyal ministers, on Xunzi’s account, will not hesitate to
save the state through dramatic action despite having a lord who will not listen to reason,
and will even act contrary to his orders, acting to ‘overturn’ the lord’s undertakings in
order to save the state from ruin and the lord from disgrace (13.2). In short, Xunzi says,
‘One should follow the Way and not follow the lord’ (13.2).

This aggressive redefinition of loyalty and obedience is quite striking. Xunzi clearly
thinks that good outcomes justify ignoring or directly thwarting the directives of one’s
lord, at least when these directives are misguided. The highest goal of a minister is to
transform one’s mediocre ruler into a sage, but Xunzi also gives advice on how to
manipulate weak and vicious rulers into better actions, and even hopes to change the
character of such men over time (13.4).

For Xunzi, the crucial task of the ruler is to choose capable, trustworthy subordinates,
whom he can then rely on to do their jobs very well (12.11, 12.1, and 12 passim). As long as
subordinates are loyal, obedient, and hard working, as well as talented, things will go well if
the ruler gives them leave to do their jobs (12.3, 12.11). While having appropriate standards
and laws is essential, Xunzi thinks, no ‘model’ for social life can implement itself, and so he
argues against all technocratic and procedural solutions to the problems of government in
favor of a sort of ‘virtue politics’ that requires wise, responsible people to implement good
laws and policy (12.1).
We should wonder just how far to extrapolate from his remarks on the lord-minister relationship to other relations of superiors and inferiors in a Confucian social hierarchy. The amount of latitude Xunzi argues for in the case of ministers seems premised on their being ‘noble men’, or junzi 君子, in his parlance, which means people who are highly cultivated, disciplined, and experienced, and dedicated to the Confucian Way. As such, their judgment can be trusted more than anyone’s but a sage’s. Others, such as infantry soldiers, peasants, and the ‘100 clans’ in general would presumably not be given so much latitude for disobedience to direct orders and penal law, in Xunzi’s view, due to their less capable judgment (e.g., 15.4). The crucial issue in hierarchical relations, for Xunzi, seems to be how much benevolent concern inferiors have for their superiors, and vice versa; in evocations of his ideal society he repeatedly likens the emotional quality of social relations to familial relationships (11.12, 12.2, 15.5, 16.2, etc.). This emotional core of loyal gratitude and concern will knit hierarchical relations together, Xunzi thinks, throughout the whole community, including the governmental bureaucracy and the military.

This is, needless to say, an idealistic view of social relations, but Xunzi seems to grasp that the ideal he presents is an extreme case, and many societies will fail to live up to it fully [as visible, for instance, in his careful separation of five different grades of ruler, reflecting different qualities of government as a whole (9.19a–d)]. A sympathetic reading of Xunzi’s philosophy would recognize his balance of realism and idealism, and when attempting to ‘retrieve’ insights from his thought, would address contemporary issues by extrapolating from some of his broad principles, such as his vision of the collective good as just and harmonious social flourishing, the priority of social justice to personal benefit, and the superiority of merit to family connections.

To address issues of civilian-military relations via this method we find some pregnant ambiguities, as well as more straightforward guidance. Working from his ideas about loyalty, obedience, and role-specific obligations and powers, one might wonder if generals should be free to contravene direct orders from their lord when they think these are misguided or wrong, according to their own grasp of the Way. On the face of it, this seems to imperil any idea of a chain of command, and recalls famous disputes between leaders and generals, such as Lincoln’s problems with Union generals early in the American civil war, or President Truman’s difficulties with MacArthur during the Korean War. However, Xunzi precisely describes the three conditions under which a general will not accept his lord’s orders, even under threat of death: being ordered to take an untenable position, to engage the enemy without prospect of victory, or to deceive the common people (15.1e). He shortly thereafter describes the role-specific duties of generals, charioteers, and officers of various ranks in terms of their dying while performing their duties (15.1f). He comments: ‘Obeying commands is the highest [consideration], achieving successful results is secondary. Advancing when ordered not to advance, or retreating when ordered not to retreat are equivalent crimes’ (15.1f, 15/71/11–12). This evidence suggests that Xunzi realizes that an effective chain of command is critical to military discipline and success, and that only in rare circumstances (analogous to the contemporary notion of an unlawful order) should an inferior disobey a superior. And clearly he views generals as subject to their lord, discussing them with other military officers as he here expounds a much more familiar conception of obedience.

How might we make sense of Xunzi’s dissimilar treatment of generals and other high ministers? It is possible that he views them as narrow specialists, in contrast to broad-minded students of the comprehensive Confucian Way. Xunzi at one point dramatically
contrasts the general perspective of a cultivated noble man from the more narrow perspective, experiences, and concerns of artisans and farmers, to make the point that only a comprehensive view will be sufficient for making apt judgments in all areas of policy (21.6b). If this were true, then he might view military leaders’ specialized skills as insufficient for making subtle and accurate judgments about the best course of action overall, beyond the realm of achieving specific objectives in the field. This divide, between skillful specialists and wise generalists, is perhaps too stark to be fully defensible, but it does suggest that Xunzi thinks different sorts of social roles and offices might require and produce different mind-sets, some of which are less transferable than others.

It seems likely, however, given his account of loyal, benevolent behavior within the army, that Xunzi sees the military as relatively more continuous with Confucian values and practices than such a picture might suggest. When pressed by Chen Xiao on his insistence that humaneness and justice (ren and yi) are the ‘root’ of military affairs, given the centrality of killing and destruction to warfare, Xunzi vigorously defends his emphasis on these values in his analysis of the military, arguing that one should love others, and therefore hate aggressors who violate others; he also defines the military as an instrument of justice, existing to right wrongs, not to conquer and confiscate land (15.2). Note further Xunzi’s distaste for ‘deception’ as a tactic, suggesting that it is unworthy of a good army (15.1d). All of this suggests real sympathy with the need for and value of military institutions, as well as a vision of those institutions as relatively similar to other governmental organs ostensibly dedicated to humaneness and justice.

If my reading of Xunzi is correct, this suggests he sees a greater similarity of dao between civilians and military than some have seen in the contemporary United States. Tom Ricks, for example, worries about the conflict between newly disciplined marines and those ‘sloppy’ and even ‘nasty’ civilians that they are supposed to fight to protect, as well as the broader parting of the ways between officers and soldiers, on the one hand, and social and political elites without military experience (Ricks 1997). It is certainly clear that Xunzi advocates a vision of elite cultivation that requires considerable discipline (1–2, passim), and so, if military values were seen as identical or even relatively continuous with civilian values, there would be more harmony in sensibility and judgment between civilian and military office-holders within a Xunzian government and society. It even appears that Xunzi sees the military as an avenue for training the (illiterate) common people into some approximation of Confucian virtue, given his accounts of foot soldiers’ eager loyalty and relative refinement of behavior in the service of a true king (11.12, 12.2, 15.5). More broadly, a self-consciously meritocratic Confucian society that explicitly seeks to support and cultivate the common good might thus have a greater harmony between civilians and military personnel, at least to the extent that many ‘bought in’ to the vision of the good promulgated by the government.12

V. Xunzi, Kant, and International Relations

In this section I examine the relevance of Xunzi’s ideas about war and politics to international relations. Specifically, following the lead of a thought-provoking talk by the political scientist Victoria Tin-bor Hui (Hui 2006), I briefly compare a Xunzian account of international relations with Immanuel Kant’s vision of ‘perpetual peace’, which forecasts a future of peaceful trade and co-operation within a league of liberal states. The point of this exercise is to explore a neo-Xunzian vision of international trade and state relations, and
how this might compare and contrast with a liberal vision of open markets and semi-open societies (open to flows of capital and goods, but with restricted flows of people). This may throw at least tangential light on the question of how to understand whether China is or could be engaged in a ‘peaceful rise’ to world prominence and military and diplomatic influence.

In 1795 Kant wrote an essay entitled ‘Perpetual Peace’, in which he outlined what he saw as the requirements of an inter-state system that would put an end to war once and for all, at least within zones of peaceful co-operation (Kant 1963). At the time this was very much an imaginative exercise, but it is striking how many elements of a contemporary Western consensus on good international order he foresaw. To summarize, Kant provides a republican myth of the founding of political order: mutual suspicion and resulting chaotic violence constitute the natural state of human relations, and peaceful co-operation needs to be established. The best way to do this is through a social contract, establishing a lawful republic made up of citizens with equal rights, and rulers who directly represent those citizens’ interests (92–98). Kant’s hope is that a government that truly represents its people would be loathe to declare and fight wars, because of their terrible costs, unless under pressure of dire necessity (94–95). Kant therefore imagines a future where every state would be republican in his sense, forming a ‘federation of free states’ that engage in mutually enriching trade (but not international finance, which Kant regards as a pernicious British invention), regulated in their interactions by international law developed over time as an analogue to civil law, even though there is no world authority to enforce it directly (98–105). Kant argues that such an arrangement would be stable because people are sufficiently self-interested that they will view war as a ‘poor game’ (94), that is, they will see it as a very bad economic and social bargain when compared to the benefits of peaceful trade, as well as a source of spectacularly manifest atrocities and other evils. Thus his view is that precisely because of the pressure of war in the state of nature, governments arise to provide some measure of safety. Eventually these will include republican states, which will in time be compelled by natural mechanisms of conflict, and resulting conflict avoidance behavior, to arrive at peaceable modes of interaction (106–114).

The parallels and divergences with Xunzi’s vision are suggestive. Xunzi agrees that the state of nature is chaotic, marked by social conflict between people competing for safety and finite goods like food and land. However, he views the rise of civilization and government as the production of elites, specifically the sage kings of past dynasties, who lead the common people out of their wretched state (19.1a). When true order is achieved, Xunzi thinks, it covers ‘all under heaven’, that is, the whole world of civilized humanity, uniting all the central states into a single political system and even community.\(^{13}\) Anything less than such a world government is deficient in some way, if only because not everyone has been successfully brought under its aegis. Kant entertains the thought of world citizenship, but is skeptical that a world government is possible, given differences in language and religion; he thinks such an arrangement would devolve into despotism (Kant 1963: 113–114). This disagreement is likely primarily due to Kant’s much greater awareness than Xunzi of the variety of civilizations and cultures, but it also reflects deeper structural principles in their understandings of social order.

On Xunzi’s view even the hegemon system in its ideal sense relies on there being a *primus inter pares* to enforce order; he thinks there must be a king, or a surrogate for a king, in place to provide a unified focal point and center of power and authority. Multiple, contending centers of authority are a recipe for disaster, Xunzi thinks (9.3). In general,
Xunzi’s model of social order is hierarchical and differentiated, with clear roles and responsibilities, and harmonious integration of the social whole – he is extremely suspicious of equals trying to operate together, because this leads to conflict, he thinks (4.12, 9.3).

War seems to be a crucial issue here, since when prosecuted justly it is analogous to penal law; without a clear authority, Xunzi thinks, it is impossible to have proper (we would say lawful) punishments, or just wars (that is, ‘punitive expeditions’). Kant too is concerned by the problem of lawful authority, and thinks a federation of free states would need some sort of analogue to civil law – what we would now call international law – even though there would be no central authority to enforce it. Whether a thinker sees this as a surmountable problem or not provides one sort of index for whether they see the possibility of a stable inter-state system in the absence of a world government. To the extent that the United Nations today functions to bless one side in certain conflicts with international approval, it functions to address this problem of right authority, co-ordinating diverse sovereign states even though it cannot effectively compel obedience. Although Xunzi is of two minds regarding the value and nature of ‘hegemons’, if we take his more lengthy, relatively positive statements in Chapter 11 as our guide, he appears to foresee the possibility of an imperfect but acceptably good state being appropriately sanctioned by other, perhaps even less good states to serve as an agent of a larger ‘federation’.

So despite Xunzi’s basic tendency to prefer harmonious, integrated, universal government under as sagacious a ruler as possible, he does make allowances for imperfect conditions. As discussed in the previous section, if there were a strong, reasonably well-run state that refused to attack others to gain territory, perhaps Xunzi’s dynamics of state influence could come into play – that is, the indirect economic and military pressure exerted by such a state would affect those around it in salutary ways, and restrain other states’ aggression. Xunzi does not advocate empire building in the usual sense of conquering wide swaths of territory; his unification of all under heaven is an ideal goal, achieved only by an overwhelmingly attractive sage king, to whom others willingly, even eagerly, submit.

Let us follow out these implicit dynamics to see what a neo-Xunzian account of international relations would look like. As with Kant, a region would need an analogue to a sovereign authority; Xunzi’s limited advocacy of an idealized system of hegemony suggests that diplomatic agreements could authorize strong states to police bad state actors. Perhaps over time such a system could even be regularized and thus institutionalized as a league or federation of states. Through either the empowered hegemonic authority, or through similar sanctioning inter-state negotiations, international analogues to Xunzi’s conception of a governmental ‘model’ (fa 法), including regulations constraining war and guiding trade, could be developed. For instance, Xunzi’s prohibition of commercial and manufacturing fraud could be the basis for fair trade deals between states, leading to freer trade according to agreed-upon standards and fair tariffs. The prohibition of aggressive war that Xunzi advocates would be a crucial element of such a system if it could be enforced more broadly. Presumably if a non-aggressive hegemonic state developed, it would make the costs of aggressive war even more extreme than they already would be, since counter-attacks would be either certain or likely. If war became less frequent, the non-warring states would continue to grow in power and influence, provided they were industrious and well governed, on a Xunzian model.
Xunzi appears to explicitly consider the question of inter-state relations when he discusses good and bad ways to ‘annex’ and hold territory (15.6a–b). Examining this carefully, however, shows that Xunzi regards conquering territory to be relatively easy; the hard part is winning the allegiance of the people involved, whether they are in newly absorbed lands or immigrate to your own state. The verbs he uses, jian 兼 and bing 并, both mean to ‘combine’ into a unified entity, and the object is people, not land, despite Knoblock’s and Watson’s translations (15/74/9–15/75/2).

In his analysis, Xunzi contrasts three techniques for ‘combining [groups of] people’: doing this by means of virtue or moral charisma, by means of force, or through using wealth. Winning people through virtue means ruling so justly and benevolently that people of a conquered state wish to be your subjects, and will obediently and happily join with you and your people. This leads to greater wealth, military strength, and moral authority and influence. If, however, one conquers others and holds territory by force, alarming and cowing the populace, they will want to flee or rebel but be too frightened. However, ruling people in this state requires great expenditures on occupying troops to retain control, and so Xunzi makes the obvious but crucial point that although one’s territory will get larger, the state as a whole will get weaker, both financially and militarily. A third option Xunzi discusses is winning people through wealth, wherein one absorbs impoverished – indeed starving – people, and feeds and takes care of them. This will require great expenditures on welfare, and he suggests it will take three years before such people can be considered trustworthy. While this method may eventually work, it too weakens the state by impoverishing it. Clearly, according to Xunzi, the only feasible way to absorb new people, whether by themselves as refugees or by absorbing them and their home territory, is to win their ‘hearts and minds’ through moral charisma (15.6a). Xunzi then expands his analysis, suggesting that while it is ‘easy’ to ‘combine’ peoples as discussed, at least initially, what is difficult is to ‘harden’ and ‘solidify’ these operations, so that they are truly dependable (15/74/19). The key way to ‘solidify’ populations’ loyalty is through ritual for the educated elites (shi 士), and good government directed at the people – this is the kingly Way, according to Xunzi (15.6b).

All of this suggests that according to Xunzi, while it might be possible to assemble an empire through force and wealth, sustaining an empire of many states will only be possible through just, benevolent government, of exactly the sort he advocates generally. As predictions go, this was a reasonably astute one, accurately forecasting the short tenure of the forthcoming Qin dynasty. But here I want to highlight the double-edged potency of Xunzi’s moral vision: on the one hand, he makes strong prudential arguments in favor of a conflict-suppressing Way of good government; on the other hand, he compellingly presents a moral and governmental paradigm that requires a unified empire, with everyone and every thing in its rightful place. I explore this ambiguity further below.

VI. Conclusion

Xunzi’s thought articulates a vision of perfect order that has been very compelling down through the centuries of Chinese imperial rule. He is obviously not the only one to formulate such an ideal in China, nor should we overstate his influence. (But neither should we underestimate the degree to which he influenced the Han dynasty in particular, and through it, all later Chinese dynasties.) The paradigm of a harmonious, unified, hierarchically differentiated, just, and benevolent polity, with a wise leader assisted by
capable, public-minded ministers, who together provide good order and moral guidance to a grateful populace, has been enduringly attractive throughout Chinese history.\(^{18}\)

Xunzi’s articulate, reasoned defense of this sort of vision, including its strong emphasis on unified authority structures rather than a separation of powers, leaves this contemporary observer with a strong sense of ambiguous potential.

Xunzi’s clear-eyed analysis of the dynamics of trade, military power, and social cohesion, particularly the way social trust rises and falls with capable, public-minded government policy and law enforcement, is an excellent example of social criticism. He shows how good government is prudentially preferable, and more powerful, than other types of government, even as it uses overt levers of power less frequently, because it does not need them – its rule is secure and even welcomed by its people. In other words, they consent to their government in a crucial way. In this vision, at all levels of society and international relations, conflict modulation leads to greater stability and lessens human suffering. This is a Xunzian analogue to Kant’s hope for perpetual peace. In practice, if any state actually lived according to Confucian strictures against wars for territorial expansion, they would be unlikely to end up as the seat of the king of all under Heaven, or a contemporary analogue – they would at best serve to restrain the predation of neighboring states, as outlined earlier.

However, Xunzi’s continuing aim for perfection also leads to lingering dissatisfaction with the merely good, such as the hegemon system. Knowing what is possible and truly excellent provokes the suspicion that, for example, the current global hegemon is not the rightful one – my state should be the paramount leader, even if imperial unification is out of the question in a religiously, ethnically, and linguistically divided world. In this sense, the ideology of perfect harmony is profoundly destabilizing, because it motivates constant striving for hegemonic status. As Xunzi says explicitly, ‘The humane man uses his state not just to maintain what he already possesses and nothing more; instead, he will unite people’ (10.14, 10/48/17–18), which appears to be an allusion to annexation as discussed above. Since by definition a hegemonic power is far from perfect, it could and should be supplanted by any state that could do a better job, by its leaders’ own lights. It is easy to imagine contemporary Chinese leaders viewing the United States in just this light, as a flawed hegemon worthy of being supplanted. Nevertheless, if this pursuit of hegemony is constrained by Confucian strictures, or even just realistic prudence, this sort of inter-state conflict could still be productive. In contemporary terms, the rise of a centralized, powerful Chinese state motivated to seek social harmony and ‘stability’ can serve to keep liberal countries from getting fat and corrupt, and vice versa. Perhaps this is the most ‘stability’ one can hope for in the contemporary world – a peace that is not perpetual, but more frequent, more sustained, and gradually including more and more of the globe.

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NOTES


2. When specific textual points are at issue, references to the Xunzi will be keyed to the ICS Concordance Series text (Lau 1996), according to the following format: (chapter/page/line). For ease of reference, I also refer in all cases to Knoblock’s complete translation, using his chapter and section numbers (Xunzi 1988–1994). Translations are my own.

3. On these issues, see Loewe and Shaughnessy (1999).

4. While Xunzi does seem to stress the personal quality of such loving devotion, he focuses repeatedly on loyalty up the chain of command, when perhaps the crucial issue is loyalty to one’s fellow soldiers. The role of ideals is left somewhat hazy here, and is not made to bear too much weight as an object of devotion.

5. On the meaning of yi in Xunzi, see especially Hutton (1996).

6. The classic essay on this in English is Rosemont (2000).


8. On both the challenges and possibilities of trying to extend basic principles and priorities from ancient Confucianism to address contemporary problems, such as weapons of mass destruction, which did not exist in ancient China, see Ivanhoe (2004). For an excellent approach to these issues in an Islamic context, see Kelsay (2007).

9. For a fuller discussion of the history of conceptions of roles, see King (2006) and Herdt (2008). Cheryl Cottine is writing a dissertation on comparative ethical issues deriving from early Confucian role morality, from which I am learning much. Rosemont and Ames (2009) also identify early Confucian ethics as being a form of ‘role morality’ but are not very precise in their characterization of it, or in their comparisons with Western alternatives.

10. Chapter 12 as a whole is Xunzi’s answer to a position like Han Feizi’s, which insists that virtue is too difficult to achieve and too unreliable when compared with explicit laws and regulations. Xunzi clearly thinks any system, no matter how well constructed, can be corrupted or simply ‘gamed’ by those who seek to use it for personal enrichment, and thus there is no escape from the need to have good people in positions of power.

11. I am glossing over numerous issues here. Xunzi has a developed theory of the hierarchy of ethical excellence among people, based on degrees of personal cultivation. For discussion, see Stalnaker (2006). I use ‘noble men’ to mark Xunzi’s presumption that this group was made up of males only. Grappling with the patriarchal presumptions and feminist potential in early Confucianism is beyond the scope of this paper.

12. It is easy to overstate military-civilian tensions in the US, as well as the value neutrality of US politics, so all of this should be taken cautiously as the sort of vague comparative speculation it is.

13. In this point of view, Xunzi is very much a product of his time. For insightful discussion of early Chinese political thought more broadly, see Pines (2009).

14. For astute analysis of this issue, see Twiss and Chan (2012), pp. 455–457. At the most abstract level, Xunzi defines shan 善 ‘good’ and e 惡 bad as follows: ‘From antiquity to the present, what all under Heaven have called good is what is correct, properly ordered,
peaceful, and well-governed. What is called bad is what is slanted, vicious, perverse, and chaotic (23.3a; 23/115/1–2). The root meanings of ‘good’ for Xunzi seem to concern publicly observable states of affairs, mostly involving proper social order. What makes aggressive warfare wrong, according to Xunzi, is that it disrupts right social order, which is necessary for communal flourishing, that is, the highest good, as well as causing innumerable subsidiary harms. What makes punitive expeditions right (that is, just wars) is that they re-establish right social order, for the good of all.

15. In Chapter 7, Xunzi writes caustically about Duke Huan of Qi, a particularly effective hegemon known for employing the capable but morally flawed minister Guan Zhong. But in Chapter 11, he writes much more appreciatively about hegemony as a second-best mode of government, next to true kingship. Knoblock sees this as a change of mind over time; Twiss and Chan speculate that this may be a sign of Xunzi’s differing assessments of actual hegemons, as compared with the possibilities of the ideal itself. For discussion, see Twiss and Chan (2012), pp. 453–454, and Xunzi (1988–1994), vol. 1, pp. 12–13.

16. I will not here enter into the historical debates regarding the actual causes of the Qin’s quick collapse, and how we are to understand the historical data from the Han, which has clear ideological interests in demonizing the Qin in order to justify Han rule.

17. On Xunzi’s influence, see especially Goldin (2007).

18. For astute discussion, again see Pines (2009). For a searching comparative analysis of Chinese and Western traditions of political philosophy down to the present, see Metzger (2005).

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