

# The Basic Content and Interpretive Logic of Xunzi's and Petrarch's Views on Virtue

Based on Books Xunzi and Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul

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**Abstract.** Xunzi was a famous thinker and statesman in ancient China, and one of the representative figures of Confucianism, who advocated the theory of the nature of evil, in opposition to Mencius' theory of the nature of good. He believed that all good and valuable things were the product of human effort. His ideas fully affirmed the value of human beings and the way they think, value and behave in their social environment. Petrarch founded the status of the humanist academic tradition and system of thought, establishing the humanities and enriching the doctrine of the human person. He advocated human nature and human dignity, fought for free will, attacked monastic asceticism and transformed the understanding of the relationship between divinity and man. Although they were in different historical times and had different life circumstances, yet they both attached equal importance to the shaping and cultivation of the concept of virtue and the pursuit of human self-transcendence. Using the literature review method and comparative analysis, it is possible to summarise the main statements on virtue in both Xunzi and Petrarch by reviewing their classic works. Further explore the differences between Xunzi's and Petrarch's views on the necessity of virtue and how it is acquired. The underlying logic in the construction of their views on virtue will be clarified in order to deepen the understanding of the times and social environment in which they lived and to fully explore the commonalities and differences between Chinese and Western cultures.

**Keywords:** Xunzi; Petrarch; Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul; Views on Virtue; Interpretive Logic.

## 1. Introduction

During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, a hundred schools of thought were in full bloom. Xunzi, a representative figure of Confucianism, developed Confucianism and advocated that human nature is inherently evil and that it should be transformed into falsehood, so as to eliminate evil and promote good. Xunzi, or Xunqing as he was known in those days, summarised the rights and wrongs of various schools of thought since the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period. He further transformed and developed Confucianism, and not only established a complete system of philosophical thought, but also summarised the positive results of the contention of the hundred schools of thought during the pre-Qin period. The main elements of his thought on education and reform include: human nature is inherently evil and the transformation of nature into falsity; the use of education to reform the people and respect for teachers; and the combination of ethics, politics, ritual and music.

The Italian scholar and poet Petrarch is considered to be a pioneer of the European Renaissance and a founder of humanism. Known for his 14-line poems, which opened the way for the development of European lyric poetry, Petrarch has since been honoured as a poet saint. Petrarch was one of the first representatives of the Renaissance to study classical culture from a humanist perspective. He collected a wide range of Greek and Roman codices and dared to break through medieval theological concepts to interpret classical writings with a new age perspective that put people and real life at the centre. His study of classical culture had an impact on the European Renaissance and on the creation of literature. Petrarch's knowledge was vast and he was the first to break away from medieval theological ideas and to begin to take a humanist view. As a priest, Petrarch had close contact with the Pope and other upper-class people, and had the opportunity to enter and leave the church and the court, whereby he was able to observe life and gain practical knowledge[1-13].

## 2. The main elements of Xunzi's concept of virtue

The Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period (770-476 BC for the Spring and Autumn Period and 475-221 BC for the Warring States Period) were periods of great change in our ancient society from slavery to feudalism. In terms of social change in general, the main vassal states began to establish their landowning power and feudal system at the beginning of the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period before that was a period of slow transition from slavery to feudalism. After the death of Confucius, Confucianism was divided into eight schools of thought. The most important of these were Mencius and Xunzi. Mencius inherited and developed the ideas of Confucius to meet the political needs of the emerging class, and put forward an ideal blueprint for governing the country and enriching the people. Xunzi, on the other hand, summed up the rights and wrongs of various schools of thought since the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States, and further transformed and developed Confucianism to suit the needs of a centralised feudal state. One of the greatest differences between the two is the concept of virtue, which Xunzi systematically innovated with regard to the need for virtue and the principles of learning.

### 2.1 The Theory of Sexual Evil: The Need to Learn the Virtues

In contrast to Mencius' theory of the goodness of nature, Xunzi advocates the theory of the evil of nature. The basic starting point of his theory is the distinction between sex and falsity. He says: "All nature is a matter of heaven, not to be done. Rites and righteousness are the birth of the sages, the things that men learn and can do and become. Those who cannot learn or do anything and are in man are called nature; those who can learn and can do something and are in man are called pseudo. This is the distinction between nature and falsity. The so-called nature is something innate, which cannot be acquired through study or formed through hard work, whereas ritual and righteousness are formulated by the sages, which can be acquired through study and formed through hard work. However, there is a difference between innate nature and acquired man-made nature. The innate nature is something that man cannot learn and cannot create, while the acquired nature is something that man can learn and can acquire through hard work. By human nature, Xunzi meant the natural attributes of human beings. He pointed out that Man is born with his nature and does not need to rely on anything. It is the same as Yu and Jie, they all want to eat when they are hungry, want to be warm when they are cold, want to rest when they are tired, and like to gain benefits but hate to be harmed. Xunzi believed that there was no intrinsic moral will in man, and that this sexual evil was a purely natural state that did not take into account the individual's acquired efforts. In Xun's view, since all human beings have desires that are innate and untouched by man, this pursuit of material gain determines the evil nature of human beings. If one is educated, one can change one's nature from evil to good, which is called "Transforming Nature into Falsity".

Confucian scholars generally agree that rule ethics and virtue ethics have their own domains, but that rule and virtue are unified. In Xunzi's theory of rites, rules and virtue are the unity of natural human nature and social construction, of "heaven" and "man", of "nature" and "falsity", of theory and practice. "nature" and "falsity", and the unity of theory and practice. Rule ethics is a theoretical ethics, which is established only in theory; virtue ethics is a practical ethics, which must be constructed in practice. Based on Xunzi's cosmology of "born and made", "heaven" and "man", "nature" and It is unnecessary and impossible to draw a clear distinction between "heaven" and "man", "nature" and "falsity", theory and practice.

### 2.2 The Virtues Learning Path: Transforming Nature into Falsity

The Xunzi's work on the Transforming Nature into Falsity is discussed in two main areas: the cultivation of one's body and the cultivation of one's character, and the governance of the state. The first is the character of a gentleman. Xunzi believes that it is only through the continuous cultivation and accumulation of the acquired qualities that one can develop a noble gentleman's personality. Secondly, it is the promotion of the virtuous and the capable. In those days of war and strife, Xunzi

advocated equality for all, the need to select talent from any category and the need to break away from the traditional notion of gentry. Thirdly, music education. Music was a way to cultivate one's moral character and to bring one's manners and morals into line with the rites and laws. Fourthly, the law. Xunzi believed that there must be a certain amount of law to ensure that everyone could accept the "pseudo" of nature, and that they could gradually achieve the goal of "transforming nature into pseudo" through practice and edification.

The significance of Xun's idea of "Transforming Nature into Falsity" is that it focuses on the transformation of human nature, mainly in terms of manners and moral values. A person may not need to be highly educated or talented, as long as he or she is a good person, a person who understands propriety, justice and integrity, and a person of high moral character. It can be seen that the idea of "the transformation of sex into falsity" focuses on the construction of human morality and the embodiment of social morality in everyone's heart. Under the conditions of a socialist market economy, the building of morality is also a very important aspect. In the turbulent Warring States period, Xunzi's idea of "Transforming Nature into Falsity" was of profound relevance in the society of that time, as it reinforced the importance of the joint regulation of the state by law and propriety. It reminded the ruler of the role of law and the gradual weakening and loss of social morality, and asked him to focus on both the restraining effect of law and the restraining effect of ritual and morality on human nature when ruling the state, so that the two could be perfectly combined to truly promote social development. It can be argued that the Transforming Nature into Falsity is an expansion of the traditional Confucian idea of governance, giving it more substance and providing more practical methods for social development.

### **3. Key elements of Petrarch's view of virtue**

Petrarch was a spokesman for the Italian Renaissance and a pioneer in the promotion of humanism, at a time when Europe was in transition from the Middle Ages to the modern era, full of contradictions and confusion, and Petrarch's ideas were a reflection of the times. Petrarch spent much of his life studying classical culture, seeing it as an anti-feudal ideological weapon. His focus on the cultivation of human virtue and his belief in the goodness of humanity made him an important representative of the Renaissance.

#### **3.1 The goodness of human nature: The Need to Learn the Virtues**

In defining the essence of human nature, Petrarch, on the one hand, imagines that human beings can attain the ideal state of spirituality and moral qualities as depicted in the Bible, and thus achieve a happy life in a common society, but at the same time he never has any expectation of human perfection or similar, but believes that perfection in human nature can be achieved through patience, restraint, discipline, faith, and sincere faith in the love of God. To achieve this, mankind has to make greater spiritual and moral sacrifices. Thus, the characters in Petrarch's works are always in a constant state of transition and sublimation from the reality of their plight to the ideal state of moral perfection, which Petrarch regards as near divinity. Yet Petrarch also acknowledges that virtue cannot be perfected, but that one must seek to move closer and closer to it. He believed that the cultivation of virtue is a process of self-improvement, and that one should learn to use one's reason through the study of knowledge, so as to discover the virtues in human nature and make them manifest.

#### **3.2 The Virtues Learning Path: Continuous learning and self-awareness**

Petrarch believes that the development of virtue lies in continuous learning and self-awareness, and ultimately in the ability to return to the beauty of nature. Petrarch's view of virtue stems from his experience of self-awakening. He has experienced three awakenings in his life. The first was an intellectual awakening, during which he accumulated a great deal of knowledge through reading ancient texts, gained a basic understanding of the world and constructed an initial system of knowledge structures. The second is an awakening to time and history, a re-examination of the

historical classics and the traces of time that exist in reality. The expanded horizons are no longer confined to the present world, and there is a growing awareness of the importance of time. The third is the awakening of nature and the self. This awakening brought him from the solitude of self-exile back to the emotionally charged reality of the world, and he began to value the beauty of life in the present. Petrarch's three awakenings spanned his youth, middle age and old age, and led him through an intellectual awakening, a temporal awakening and an emotional awakening, leaving him in a precarious state of gradual certainty that he would occupy an important place in history. It also sums up the path of virtue generation: through the constant learning of knowledge, dialectical introspection in the perspective of the larger history, and the eventual return to nature. Petrarch's virtue generation is actively internalised and introspective, whereas Xunzi's is driven by external factors, which is the greatest difference between the two.

#### 4. Conclusion

Xunzi and Petrarch, despite living in different regions and historical periods, as important representatives of the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States and the Renaissance, attached equal importance to the cultivation of virtue. However, they differed greatly in the way they discussed their respective views of virtue. The sources of the need for virtue education and the nature of the human person and the path of learning are the two areas where they show the greatest differences. Xunzi believed that human nature is inherently evil, and that teaching by example is more important than teaching by word. He believed that through the physical actions of moral people, they can effectively lead others around them to imitate and follow them at the behavioural and conceptual levels. He believed that through the physical actions of a moral person, he could effectively motivate those around him to imitate and follow him at the behavioural and conceptual levels, thereby transferring morality from the individual to society. Ultimately each individual in society acquires virtue in the social sense by means of Transforming Nature into Falsity. Petrarch differs in his belief in the ultimate goodness of human nature. He advocates the use of rational virtue to approach divinity. At the same time, he acknowledges that virtue cannot be perfected, but that one must seek to move closer and closer to it. He believed that the cultivation of virtue is a process of self-improvement, and that one should learn to use one's reason through the study of knowledge, so as to discover the virtues in human nature and make them manifest.

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