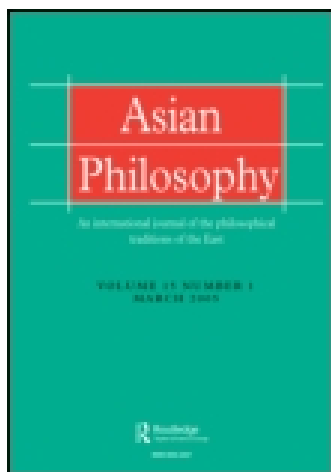


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Naming/Power: Linguistic Engineering and the Construction of Discourse in Early China

Ori Tavor

The interplay between language and politics has been the subject of increased academic interest in the last few decades. The idea that language can be used as a device not only for communication but also for control and manipulation, however, is by no means new. This article traces the emergence of one of the first fully formed Chinese theories of language, Xunzi's 'rectification of names' doctrine, in order to reconstruct a social history of language in early China. In addition to situating Xunzi's philosophical system in the intellectual and historical context of the late Warring States period, this article also draws on Michel Foucault's theory of knowledge and power to argue that early Chinese thinkers were fully aware of language's constitutive role in the restoration of sociopolitical stability and thus sought to portray linguistic engineering as an efficacious, noncoercive, tool of government as part of an overarching single ruler-based political system.

Introduction

The interplay between language and politics has been the subject of increased academic interest in the last few decades. In his introductory remarks to an influential edited volume published in 1987, cultural historian Peter Burke expressed the need to embark on a new intellectual endeavor—the creation of a new discipline that will bridge the gap between linguistics, sociology, and history. Motivated by what he deemed as a lack of attention to the social dimensions of the development of human language, Burke claimed that this new approach, which he called the social history of language, should focus on the role of language as a social institution and the intrinsic power of language to shape sociopolitical reality. The idea that language can be used as a device not only for communication but also for control and manipulation, he argued, is by no means new. European clergy, for example, used their knowledge of Latin, a language unknown to most of their adherents, as a tool to augment their

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authority through their exclusive mastery of the 'divine' language and opposed the translation of scripture into local European languages (Burke & Porter, 1987, pp. 1–3). This idea is probably best articulated in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), which describes a dystopian world where a highly engineered form of language called Newspeak is used by the totalitarian regime to control its subjects.

The use of language as a device for political control, however, was not only a Western phenomenon. In fact, one of the largest campaigns of language reform in human history was launched by Chairman Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party in the 1940s. This project of 'linguistic engineering', to use the phrase coined by Ji Fengyuan (2004, p. 4), included two aspects: the creation of a new lexicon and semantics, suppressing some words and inventing others to take their place, and the strict enforcement of the habitual use of fixed formulations 體法 (*tifa*) that were deemed politically and morally correct. These formulations, defined by Michael Schoenhals as 'fixed units of discourse designed to produce a certain effect upon feelings, thought, or actions of a target audience' (pp. 9–10), were evaluated by the central authorities according to a set of pre-established criteria to judge their political usefulness. This conviction in the crucial role of formalized language in the augmentation of the structure of power in China's new political system, adds Schoenhals, is evident in Mao Zedong's famous statement: 'one single [correct] formulation, and the whole nation will flourish; one single [incorrect] formulation, the whole nation will decline' (1992, p. 3).

In their attempts to explain this phenomenon, most scholars agree that even though linguistic engineering exists to some extent in every society, the Orwellian aspirations of the Chinese state certainly stand out in their vehemence and scale. Moreover, while the main motivation of this project can be traced to Marxist ideas that were imported to China, there must have been an established Chinese attitude toward language that made these policies easier to accept. Ji and Schoenhals, for instance, concur that language formalization was a subject of utmost importance throughout Chinese history and identify the Confucian doctrine of the 'rectification of names' 正名 (*zhengming*) as a constitutive theory that set the tone for any subsequent linguistic policy (Ji, 2004, pp. 42–44; Schoenhals, 1992, p. 2). Following their lead, my goal in this article will be to trace the emergence and development of the 'rectification of names' doctrine in order to reconstruct a social history of language in early China and identify the key paradigms for subsequent projects of linguistic engineering.

Given the limited scope of this article, I intend to frame my discussion around the theory of the 'rectification of names' as it is articulated in the writings of the Confucian philosopher Xunzi 荀子 (flourished (fl.) third century BCE). I have chosen Xunzi for multiple interrelated reasons. A product of the late Warring States period, Xunzi's work contains direct and clear references to the theories of earlier thinkers that otherwise exist only in fragmentary form. Moreover, Xunzi's desire to reformulate Confucian doctrine to better suit the new world order of his time led him to adopt a clear methodology of presenting his ideas by arguing against the views of his philosophical rivals. Xunzi's discourse on language, for instance, contains overt

references to the Daoist ideas presented in the *Laozi*, the epistemological speculation found in the *Mohist Canon*, the work of the various Dialecticians often referred to as members of the ‘School of Names’ 名家 (*mingjia*), and it also draws inspiration from the more practical administrative theories presented in Legalist writings (Wu, 1983, p. 715).

Given its relative coherence and philosophical poignancy, Xunzi’s theory of language has received a fair share of scholarly interest in the last few decades, mostly from comparative philosophers. Xunzi has been labeled as a constructivist (Hagen, 2002), a nominalist (Graham, 1989, p. 141; Makeham, 1994, pp. 58–62), a conventionalist and an absolutist (Hansen, 2000, pp. 319–322), a realist (Eno, 1990, p. 272), a semantic inferentialist (Lin, 2011), and a correlativist (Möller, 2001) and his ‘rectification of names’ doctrine has been analyzed against the backdrop of influential Western theories of language, from Aristotle to Gottlob Frege (Chen, 2009). In this article, however, I opt to take a different approach. While I agree that Xunzi raises some poignant ontological and epistemological contentions about the relationship between language and the phenomenal world and the construction of meaningful linguistic units and systems, I believe that the ‘rectification of names’ treatise was not written as a self-contained theory of language nor was it meant to be read in isolation, outside a political context. In fact, when read against the backdrop of other Warring States texts it becomes clear that Xunzi is not interested in investigating the nature of language *per se* but in determining who should have control over it. Xunzi, I will argue, is well aware of language’s unique power in shaping the way we perceive, evaluate, and discuss reality and thus he is principally concerned with the potential uses of linguistic engineering as an administrative technique—constructing a clear and efficient system of language that will allow the ruler to ensure sociopolitical stability and harmony with minimal coercion. In this sense, the ‘rectification of names’ theory is not an exercise in the philosophy of language but an investigation of what Michel Foucault calls discourse, the organization and creation of meaning within a given social context through the vehicle of language (1980, p. 196). Xunzi’s framework of linguistic engineering can thus be described as a technique of knowledge and power, a strategic device that allows the ruler to exercise power in a non-suppressive manner by attending to the linguistic system and dictating a suitable discourse.

In the following pages, I will thus attempt to reconstruct a social history of language in early China through the prism of Xunzi’s ‘rectification of names’ theory. I intend to use Foucault’s theory of knowledge/power and his insights into the political uses of discourse occasionally throughout this article in order to draw out some of the salient points in Xunzi’s thought, including his designation of linguistic engineering as the fundamental performances of proper government and his emphasis on ritual as a complementary form of noncoercive techniques of power. In order to fully appreciate Xunzi’s philosophical vision, however, we must first identify his opposition—the linguistic theories advocated by his contemporaries—the Mohists and the Dialecticians. These philosophers, I will argue, were drawing attention to the flaws of the current linguistic system and suggesting ways in which it could be

reformed. Alarmed by these proposals, Xunzi reacted by devising his own theory, which put control over all matters of language in the hands of a just ruler. Drawing on the work of some of his predecessors, mainly the Legalist thinker Shen Buhai, Xunzi's 'rectification of names' doctrine was designed to obtain two complementary objectives: presenting a potential ruler with an efficacious form of noncoercive government while at the same time setting high standards of rulership to prevent despotism by subjugating current rulers to the linguistic and ritual systems invented by the legendary sage-rulers of the ancient past.

Names, Reality, and Language Reform

In order to fully understand Xunzi's theory of language, we must first place it in its proper intellectual context. Philosophical discourse, after all, revolves around refuting rival positions as much as asserting one's own theories. Xunzi's rivals on this issue were a loosely organized group of thinkers known in Warring States literature as dialecticians or logicians 辯者 (*bianzhe*), which were later collectively referred to as the School of Names. Unfortunately, very little of their actual work has survived in the received literature. Apart from one text attributed to Gongsun Long 公孙龙 (fl. third century BCE), all we know about these thinkers from anecdotes and fragmentary accounts found in texts such as the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, where their sophistry is often ridiculed and used as a rhetorical device for advancing the author's own philosophical agenda (Watson, 1968, p. 189).

Nonetheless, when read together, these scant accounts reveal that these thinkers were mostly interested in testing the limits of our standard use of language through the use of paradoxes such as 'a white horse is not a horse' 白馬非馬也 and 'today I went to Yue but got there yesterday' 今日適越而昔來 (Goldin, 1999, pp. 84–87). While these are sometimes portrayed as an indication of a purely theoretical fascination with language (Bao, 1990, p. 195), recent scholarship has suggested that the motivation behind their efforts was practical and political in nature. Chad Hansen (2000, p. 258), for instance, argues that far from being mere games of sophistry, the paradoxes and theoretical musings of these thinkers were part of a serious attempt to reform what they regarded as a flawed linguistic system. Consider, for example, the following statement from Gongsun Long's treatise, *On Names and Entities* 名實論 (*Mingshi Lun*):

A name names an entity. If one knows that 'this' is not 'this,' or if one knows that 'this' is not at 'this,' then it is not named ['this']. If one knows that 'that' is not 'that,' or if one knows that 'that' is not at 'that,' then it is not named ['that']. (Johnston, 2004, p. 273)

The world, according to this passage, consists of various entities 實 (*shi*) that need to be associated with names 名 (*ming*) in order to identify them consistently. In order to ensure a stable correlation, however, we need to establish a proper methodology and clear rules to guide this process. The current rules and guidelines, it is argued, are

simply too vague and thus need to be rethought and reformulated. Only then will we be able to understand reality and restore sociopolitical stability.

The dialecticians were, for lack of a better term, language reformers. The same motivation can be assigned to the Later Mohists, another loosely organized group of intellectuals that flourished in the late Warring States period. As self-identified followers of Mozi 墨子 (fl. fifth century BCE), the Later Mohist theory of language should thus be read in the context of its overarching philosophical goal—creating an epistemological foundation to the Mohist ethics of utility. Many of their writings, known as the *Mohist Canons*, are thus dedicated to elucidating the way we perceive reality, reflect upon it, and later discuss it through language. Developing an idea that we saw in Gongsun Long's work, the Later Mohists argued that the act of naming, that is, matching names to entities, is basically an arbitrary act of convention. Once a certain name is picked as shorthand for a certain object or a class of objects, it replaces it by representing it linguistically. Thus, after making the initial association between name and entity, we must guard it zealously, otherwise it is meaningless. When there is dispute over a name, we turn back to the standard, in order to ascertain which name is appropriate:

One calling it 'ox' and one calling it 'non-ox' means to contend over it. That being the case, they do not both fit the fact. Since they do not both fit the fact, one of them necessarily does not fit. (Graham, 1978, p. 318)

The butt of the Later Mohist criticism in this passage is philosophical disputation, or more precisely, the paradoxes of the Dialecticians, their rival language reformers. Contending over a name after its meaning has already been set, they argue, is a counterproductive activity. The role of language is to help us convey meaning in the clearest fashion possible so as to enable right and just action. Once a system of names is agreed upon according to the principles of common sense, there is absolutely no need to discuss it further. Any attempt to engage in metadiscourse about the nature of language or to doubt the validity of the process of naming is therefore pointless.

As evident in the examples presented above, the growing complexity of philosophical disputation in the late Warring States period resulted in the emergence of a skeptical attitude toward the efficacy of the existing linguistic system. Driven by this sense of philosophical crisis, the Dialecticians and Later Mohists called for extensive language reform and put forth prospective plans for its implementation. These initiatives, however, were not embraced by all. Xunzi, for example, pronounced his disapproval quite clearly in the following passage:

Splitting words and arbitrarily creating names, thereby bringing disorder to [the task of] ordering the names, causing the people to have doubts and to be misled and multiplying the disputes and arguments among them, this is what we call the 'great wickedness.' Its punishment should be the same as of those who tamper with weights and measures. (Wang, 1988, p. 414)¹

Unlike the veiled criticism of the Later Mohists, Xunzi's attack on the promotion of language reforms by individual thinkers is unforgiving, depicting it as an act of grand treason. While criticizing the positions of rival thinkers is certainly a common

rhetorical device in the *Xunzi*, the condemnation of individual language reformers still stands out in its severity. Callously tinkering with the linguistic system, he argues, is an immoral act of political subversion that can only lead to confusion and sociopolitical chaos. In order to understand these severe allegations, I would argue, we must read this passage against the backdrop of Xunzi's overarching philosophical vision.

Government, Hierarchy, and Language in the *Xunzi*

The *Xunzi* discusses a variety of topics, ranging from ethics and ritual self-cultivation to epistemology, theories of perception, and metaphysics. Yet, when read in the context of the late Warring States period, it becomes apparent that the common thread that runs through the various chapters of the *Xunzi* is, as with most contemporaneous texts, the reestablishment of sociopolitical stability in the form of a well-ordered state. As a third century BCE Confucian thinker, Xunzi takes it upon himself to defend the ideas of his intellectual predecessor, Confucius, reformulating them in order to make them relevant to the ever-changing sociopolitical reality. Xunzi's theory of the rectification of names, therefore, must be read as but one component in an overall politically motivated philosophical argument, namely that a well-ordered linguistic system is crucial for proper government. This agenda is made clear in the opening lines of the 'Rectification of Names' chapter:

These were the complete names of the Later Kings: in matters concerning legal terms, they followed the Shang. In matters concerning terms of social status, they followed the Zhou. In matters concerning terms of cultural practices they followed the ritual system. As for the unspecified names applied to all the myriad things, they followed the established customs of the central Xia states. When dealing with villages of remote areas, which differed in their customs, they implemented [their linguistic system] to enable communication. (Wang, 1988, pp. 411–412)

Xunzi's reference to the Later Kings 後王 (*houwang*) reveals his pragmatic agenda for the rectification of names project. Unlike the Former Kings 先王 (*xianwang*), the sage-rulers of the remote past who were responsible for the formation of human civilization, the phrase Later Kings refers to the rulers of the recent past who did not invent language but only adjusted the linguistic system by reference to previous guidelines. The differentiation between the reign of the Former and Later Kings is a common trope in early Chinese philosophical literature. The *Laozi* 老子, for example, is strewn with references to an ideal state of affairs that existed in the remote past, predating the invention of human institutions such as government and language. According to author of that text, words create distinctions which in turn distract us from perceiving reality as it is. Language, like any other man-made creation, cannot help us understand those aspects of reality that are significant and constant, and thus maintaining the linguistic system is certainly not the most fundamental step in creating a well-ordered society (Hansen, 2000, pp. 214–222). Xunzi, on the other hand, represents the more realistic faction that acknowledges the irrevocability of

historical progress and sees the emergence of a hierarchical sociopolitical order, imperfect as it may be, as a given fact. Man, believes Xunzi, is by nature a social being. But, when forming a society, we must follow certain rules:

It is the inborn nature of men which makes it impossible for them not to form a society. But, when they form a society, if it has no distinctions, it will only lead to strife, strife will lead to social chaos and social chaos will lead to destitution. Thus, a lack of distinctions is man's greatest disaster, but the existence of distinctions will bring fundamental benefit to all under Heaven. (Wang, 1988, p. 179)

The lack of proper distinctions 分 (*fen*) in society is thus Xunzi's greatest worry. In this sense, he regards the linguistic system of the Former Kings as successful—it covered all aspects of social life, established clear lines of communication, and made sociopolitical distinctions clear and understandable. All this enabled the smooth running of the state:

... The wise created distinctions and separations and established names so as to clearly indicate entities in reality. Names were used to make the distinctions between eminent and humble clear and entities were used to discriminate between things that are the same and things that are different. When [the distinctions between] eminent and humble are clear and the same and the different are separated, there will be no worry as to the conveyance of intentions and no obstruction regarding the unhindered implementation of duties. This is the purpose of having names. (Wang, 1988, p. 415)

Unfortunately, this state of affairs, which worked well in the early stages of the Zhou reign, is forever gone, changed by the harsh reality of the Warring States period:

Now, when the Sage-kings are gone, the preservation of names is sloppy, strange words are created, the connection between language and reality is disorderly and the boundaries between right and wrong are not clear. (Wang, 1988, p. 414)

The decline of the well-ordered name system of the past is seen as one of factors leading to the loss of morality and, ultimately, sociopolitical chaos. This issue is of major importance to Xunzi, who, like other classical Confucian thinkers, regards morality as one of the cornerstones of a harmonious society. But, who is to blame for this crisis? The 'emergence of strange words' is an obvious reference to individual philosophers like the Dialecticians and the Later Mohists who take it as their mission to investigate the boundaries of language and reform it according to their own private criteria. But who is to blame for the sloppy preservation of the linguistic system? In this case, it is surely the rulers of his time who are culpable. Controlling and ordering the linguistic system, after all, is a fundamental and crucial component of government. As such, this prerogative should be placed in the hands of a capable ruler who assumes the role of the sole caretaker and maintainer of the linguistic system and the sociopolitical order it represents. In order to understand Xunzi's criticism of the current rulers and his view of the role of the ruler, however, we must first examine the other sources that inspired his philosophical vision—the political theories of his predecessors, Confucius 孔子 (551–479 BCE) and Shen Buhai 申不害 (d. 337 BCE).

Rulership, Bureaucracy, and the Rectification of Names

Shen Buhai served as Chancellor of the state of Hanv 韓 in the mid-fourth century BCE. While there are some doubts whether the text that bears his name, the *Shenzi* 申子, was written by him or compiled by his disciples from previous sources, most scholars agree that the philosophy of Shen Buhai was instrumental in the development of the school of thought later known as ‘Legalism’ (Makeham, 1994, p. 68).² Unlike the theories of the Dialecticians and the Later Mohists, the discussion in the *Shenzi* does not involve matching names to entities or asserting the connection between perception and the designation of names. Instead, it focuses on the issue of language control as a practical administrative method (Creel, 1974, p. 112). According to Shen Buhai, political control should lie in the hands of a single authority—the ruler. In the past, when the population was relatively small, rulers could rely on their individual awe-inspiring charisma. But, as populations grew, rulers became more and more dependent on administrative methods to control the bureaucratic mechanism. One of the most basic requirements was a clear division of power and labor within the state—assigning a proper task to each component in this intricate machine. This task involved the creation of clear categories and guidelines. Names were the instrument by which these categorizations are made possible. Once names have been satisfactorily assigned, the ruler no longer had to deal with the daily governing of his state. He could simply send out his agents and have them bring back reports and respond to them in terms of the established categories. Thus:

When names are rectified, affairs will be settled of their own accord. Thus, he who possesses the Way [i.e. the ruler] relies on names and rectifies them, and adapts to affairs in order to settle them... [He] listens [to affairs] by means of their names, looks [into them] by means of their names, and gives his orders by means of the [appropriate] names. (Creel, 1974, pp. 349–351)³

Rectifying names thus involves the creation of proper discourse, what Foucault calls ‘giving form to modes of knowledge’. According to Foucault, institutions of power, such as government, are dependent on specialist knowledge and a specific vocabulary to assert their power. In order to ensure law and order, to use one of Foucault’s examples, a discourse on the social dangers of excessive violence, accompanied by the invention of new terminology and categories, was initiated in early modern Europe. This, in turn, allowed the government to create the penal and corrective systems. Hence, he argues, the production of knowledge through discourse and the exercise of authoritative power are often intrinsically entwined (Foucault 1995, p. 27).

Shen Buhai’s political vision, of course, is vastly different from the democratic regimes of modern Europe. The monarch who is Shen’s ideal ruler did not need to sway public opinion through the creation of discourse in order to accomplish his goals. He did, however, depend on the loyalty and efficiency of his ministers and officials. The shift in the aristocratic clan-based form of government associated with the Zhou to a new vision based on bureaucratic principles also meant a change in the relationship between the ruler and his administration. Creating an efficient and

transparent system based on clear terminology was thus seen as a mission of the utmost importance.

Stressing the importance of rectifying names as a fundamental step of government is not unique to the work of Shen Buhai. In fact, it is an important feature of what may be the most well-known articulations of the ‘rectification of names’ doctrine, which can be found in the *Analects* 論語 (*Lunyu*). Upon being asked by his disciple Zilu what would be his first step in governing 政 (*zheng*), Confucius replies that he would initiate a rectification 正 (*zheng*) of names, and proceeds to offer the following explanation:

If names are not rectified, then words do not flow smoothly. If words do not flow smoothly, then affairs cannot be completed. If affairs cannot be completed, then ritual and musical performances cannot be upheld. If ritual and musical performances cannot be upheld, then punishments and penalties do not fit [the crimes]. If punishments and penalties do not fit [the crimes], then the people will not know hand from foot. Thus, when the gentleman bestows a name, it must be practicable in speech. When he speaks, it must be practicable in action. In his speech, the gentleman is never careless. (Yang, 1958, pp. 141–142)

The appearance of the term ‘rectification of names’ in Confucius’s answer, together with the long-established dating of the *Analects* to the fifth century BCE, have led traditional Chinese commentators and modern scholars alike to read this passage as the first mature articulations of the rectification of names doctrine in Warring States literature. Others, however, have doubted its authenticity and suggested it might be a later interpolation (Makeham, 1994, pp. 163–165). Setting aside the problematic nature of this particular passage and its role in the evolution of the concept, several conclusions can still be drawn. First, like Shen Buhai and Xunzi, the author of this passage sees the rectification of names, that is, clearly delineating the scope and limits of proper discourse, as the first and fundamental task of government. Neglecting this duty, he argues, will initiate a chain reaction that might lead to complete sociopolitical chaos. In this sense, language must be constantly attuned and rectified to correspond with changing circumstances (Hall & Ames, 1987, pp. 261–264, 268–275). On the other hand, like the Dialecticians and the Later Mohists, the author assigns this task of attunement to the gentleman and not the ruler, thereby placing himself on the side of individual language reformers. In doing so, the *Analects* passage stands out as representing an early stage of the ‘rectification of names’ doctrine. This, argues John Makeham, might also explain why there are no references to this passage in Xunzi’s ‘Rectification of Names’ chapter even though ‘such a reference would have lent prestige and authority to [his] employment of the term’ (p. 163).

Xunzi’s vision combines Shen Buhai’s ruler-centered philosophy with the moral aspects of the basic ‘rectification of names’ theory that we find in the *Analects*. In Shen Buhai’s philosophy, morality does not play a significant role. The ruler is simply the one who occupies the throne, and his success is dependent on his ability to use a variety of administrative techniques, linguistic engineering being one of them, to ensure the loyalty of his ministers and the smooth running of his state. In the *Analects*, however, the ‘rectification of names’ is primarily an ethical endeavor. The

Confucian gentleman has a moral obligation to function as a role model for the people by embodying the linguistic system and by employing it correctly in his behavior. Xunzi, who saw himself as a follower of Confucius, modifies the rudimentary doctrine found in the *Analects* and adapts it to the new sociopolitical reality. Faced with an almost ubiquitous belief in monarchic rule as the only solution for the ailments of his time, Xunzi resorts to designing a philosophical system that justifies autocratic rulership while simultaneously redefining it. He does so by positing two levels of rulership—the semi-divine sage-rulers of the ancient past (the Former Kings) and the morally upright rulers of the recent past (the Later Kings). As we recall, the Former Kings were depicted as the creators of human civilization, including the social institution of language, while the Later Kings were seen as preservers of the cultural accomplishments of their predecessors. These two models of ideal rulership are equally important in Xunzi's philosophical system. While the Former Kings are used to explain the uniqueness of their linguistic system and its compatibility to the fundamental patterns of reality, the Later Kings function as a more tangible ideal for current rulers tasked with the duty of implementing the language invented by their predecessors. In order to understand this qualitative distinction between two models of rulership, however, we must turn to Xunzi's theory of human nature and self-cultivation.

Human Nature and the Unique Cognition of the Sage

Xunzi's theory of human nature is probably the most well-known and well-studied facet of his thought. Chapter 23, titled 'Human Nature is Bad' 性惡 (*xing'è*), has traditionally been depicted as Xunzi's response to a claim made by his Confucian predecessor, Mencius, regarding the inherent goodness of our inborn nature. Mencius's claim that human beings have an innate propensity for goodness that should be nourished through an organic process of self-cultivation, it is often said, gave some of his more cynical philosophical rivals an opportunity to attack the validity of the Confucian educational project. Xunzi's essay was thus written in an attempt to defend the teachings of his master against such criticism by offering an alternative take on self-cultivation. Building on this insight, recent studies offer a more nuanced reading of Xunzi's theory of human nature, downplaying the traditional Mencius–Xunzi rivalry and instead focusing on the points of congruity between the two as advocates of the Confucian project of self-cultivation through education. Paul R. Goldin, for example, represents this new line of argument in stressing that Mencius and Xunzi share a common belief in the human potential for moral perfection and the crucial role of an educational regimen in achieving this goal but differed in their understanding of the mechanism of this process. While Mencius regards moral self-cultivation as an introspective process of uncovering one's innate goodness, Xunzi argues that the only way to perfect the naturally egocentric self is to reshape it using external models and devices such as teachers, classical works of literature, and rituals for guidance and motivation (Goldin 2011a, p. 72).

Read against the backdrop of his overarching political vision, Xunzi's theory of human nature can be understood as an attempt to demonstrate the uniqueness and irreplaceability of the single ruler by positing the artificial external models created by the sage-rulers of the ancient past and preserved by the rulers of the recent past as vital triggers in the process of self-cultivation. Humans, argues Xunzi, are born as egocentric beings filled with voracious desires. Their need to fulfill these desires leads them to behave in an antisocial manner, trampling on others in a quest to satisfy their own wishes in a seemingly unending cycle. This grave situation, however, is not unalterable, as human beings, along with their inborn nature and dispositions, are also born with an ability to think reasonably and devise tools that can help them evolve and transform themselves. Through a rigorous process of self-cultivation, argues Xunzi, humans can undergo a complete cognitive and physical transformation resulting in the creation of a 'second nature' that takes over our flawed innate nature:

[The gentleman] trains his eyes not to desire to see that which is not right, his ears not to desire to hear that which is not right, his mouth not to desire to say that which is not right, and his mind not to ponder upon that which is not right. When he reaches the apex of finding pleasure [in what is right], his eyes will find greater pleasure in the five colors, his ears will find greater pleasure in the five sounds, his mouth will find greater pleasure in the five flavors, and his mind will find greater benefit in all that exists under Heaven. (Wang, 1988, p. 19)

The training of our sense organs and the mind that controls them induces a complete psychophysical transformation. The cultivated person is actually able to perceive, understand, and enjoy the world in way that is qualitatively different from the experience of the uncultivated (Tavor, 2013, pp. 316–319). But, in order to embark on this long journey, humans need both an initial push and a constant guiding light, a horizon they can use to navigate their way through this arduous process and avoid relapsing into their original state of licentiousness. This role, argues Xunzi, can only be filled by those who have already overcome their initial limitation and reached the end point of their journey:

If you do not climb a high mountain, you will not be able to fathom the loftiness of Heaven. If you do not look down a deep ravine, you will not be able to fathom the thickness of Earth. If you do not hear the words bequeathed by the Former Kings, you will not be able to fathom the greatness of learning and inquiry. (Wang, 1988, p. 2)

Without the guidance of those who already reached their goals, argues Xunzi, most people will never be able to make the first step in the long road to self-cultivation. Luckily, some exemplary figures, the Former Kings, have already accomplished this task. Furthermore, drawing on their enhanced cognitive and mental skills, they designed a variety of tools to aid in the process of self-cultivation and bequeathed them to their successors, the Later Kings. The most important and fundamental of these tools was their ideal linguistic system.

Language as a Noncoercive Technique of Knowledge and Power

As we have seen, the main concern in Warring States discourse on language was the issue of naming—establishing clear guidelines for rectifying the linguistic system by matching names to their corresponding entities. A theory of language thus requires a matching epistemological model that explains how realities are perceived and then assigned the proper names. Understanding the relationship between sense perception, knowledge, and naming was at the heart of the Later Mohist project of creating epistemic criteria for moral judgment (Hansen, 2000, pp. 242–244). Faced with such increasingly sophisticated epistemological models, Xunzi devised his own theory of cognition and knowledge acquisition. As we recall, he argued that despite our flawed innate nature, there is one important faculty that all humans possess—the ability to perceive the world through sensory perception and organize this data by means of our mind. But, while all humans have these capacities, most will never learn how to use them fully in order to uncover the basic patterns of reality. According to Xunzi’s epistemological theory, different people perceive and know the world to different degrees depending on their level of self-cultivation. Common people, he argues, simply live and act in reality without fully understanding it. Sages, however, are unlike ordinary people, as they:

[constantly] purify their heavenly ruler [their mind], rectify their heavenly faculties [their senses], take care of their heavenly provisions, obey the heavenly rule, nourish their heavenly dispositions, and thus complete Heaven’s accomplishments. In this way they understand what is to be done and what is not to be done. (Wang, 1988, pp. 309–310)

Transformed through self-cultivation, the sage is able to use the data received from sensory input, analyze it in his mind, and isolate common structures and patterns from the diversity of the phenomenal world. This ability, argues Xunzi, is what distinguishes the sage from those who presume to know this Great Ordering Principle 大理 (*dali*), but in fact only grasp a small portion of it (p. 386). Understanding this principle, referred to throughout the chapter as the Way 道 (*dao*), is of utmost importance for Xunzi, as it allows the sage to create the linguistic tools and devices that function as triggers and guidelines in the process of self-cultivation. As we recall, the act of naming involves creating distinctions. How does one go about accomplishing this task? Xunzi’s answer is as follows:

[The sages] relied on their senses. Generally, things belonging to the same category and the same natural characteristics will be perceived by the senses as the same objects. Thus, after comparing them and putting aside any doubt, they are deemed as similar and sharing the same [category and natural characteristics]. In this way, a general name is agreed upon and it can be mutually used when the occasion demands... [In addition], the mind possesses an ability to seek knowledge. But, only when relying on the ears can one understand sound and only when relying on the eyes can one understand shape. (Wang, 1988, pp. 415–417)

Language, argues Xunzi, was created by the sages, also known as the Former Kings, based on their superior cognitive and analytical faculties. Being able to identify the

patterns of the Way, the sages then proceeded to use these principles to establish the proper discourse—create a system of categories and names that enables the creation of social and political institutions such as government. The seminality of this act becomes clear when read in light of Foucault's knowledge/power paradigm. As we have seen, the creation of specialist knowledge and its accompanying terminology is one of the most basic conditions allowing the existence of the sociopolitical institution of government. Discourse, in this sense, provides rules—it governs the way we construct ideas and then put them into practice. Institutions thus have a vested interest in shaping discourse in order to augment their power (Foucault 1980, p. 131). They do so through what Foucault calls institutional apparatuses or techniques, a diverse ensemble consisting of discourses, administrative measures, scientific statements, and philosophical propositions. These techniques of knowledge and power are thus a precondition for the successful establishment of government both logically and chronologically as they allow political institutions to dictate discourse and exercise power in a non-suppressive manner. Overt coercive power, he argues, will only provoke resistance against the central institutions of society. By controlling the way people perceive and discuss reality, government is able to regulate power relations without using force (Foucault 1980, p. 196).

In this sense, Xunzi's project of linguistic engineering can be understood as a technique of knowledge/power that shapes the way we perceive reality and engage with it. The rectification of names takes chronological and logical precedence since it sets the rules of the game. For these reasons, rectifying names is the ruler's number one priority:

As for the true ruler's regulation of names—if names are fixed and actualities are distinguished, if the Way is put into practice and his intentions are communicated, then he can vigilantly lead the people and thus unify them... In this way, his legacy will endure. To have one's legacy endure and achievements complete, this is the pinnacle of order. These achievements are the result of being conscientious in preserving the agreed upon system of names. (Wang, 1988, p. 414)

By establishing a direct link between the maintenance of a well-ordered system of names and the ruler's enduring legacy, Xunzi is positing linguistic engineering is the fundamental act of government, the most basic technique of power and knowledge. Language is a vehicle of power. Words create discourse and shape the way we think, speak, and act. Individually motivated attempts to redesign the linguistic system are an act of sedition precisely because they redefine the way we experience and reflect upon reality. A prosperous state, argues Xunzi, must be of one mind, speak in one voice—that of its one and true ruler.

Conclusion

In a lecture given at the Collège de France in 1970, later published under the title 'The Discourse on Language', Foucault makes the following claim:

Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it... What is an educational system, after all, if not a ritualization of the word; if not a qualification of some fixing of roles for speakers... if not a distribution and an appropriation of discourse, with all its learning and its powers? (1972, p. 227)

Foucault's genealogical analysis and Xunzi's philosophy are the products of very different intellectual projects. Foucault saw himself as an historian of the human sciences tasked with excavating and tracing these hidden structures and networks of power within the society. He saw it as his role as an intellectual to unmask the way certain social institutions operate. Xunzi, like most other Warring States thinkers, consciously strove to create administrative tools of government, validate their efficacy by rooting them in an overarching philosophical scheme, and submit them to a potential ruler. Foucault's genealogical analysis of the political application of education and the role of discourse in shaping power relation in society, however, can be used to understand early Chinese theories of language since the very same processes that Foucault wishes to uncover in his work are plainly articulated by thinkers such as Xunzi.

Language and discourse, argues Xunzi, are instruments for shaping reality. Linguistic engineering, as a technique of power and knowledge, is thus above all a tool of government. As such, the mission of rectifying names should not be entrusted to philosophers, but placed in the hands of a single ruler, who is the sole caretaker of the linguistic system. Xunzi's proposed form of government can thus be called authoritarian, in the sense that the just ruler is quite literally the author of the very language of the state—he governs by authoring a proper language which defines and structures reality for all of its subjects. Understanding the power of discourse in Xunzi's philosophical vision against the backdrop of Foucault's power/knowledge paradigm can even help us understand the well-studied but often misconstrued claim raised by Xunzi in the 'Rectification of Names' Chapter—that names have no intrinsic appropriateness (*ming wu ding yi*, 名無固宜):

Names have no intrinsic appropriateness. Their meaning is agreed upon by the act of naming. If this agreement becomes fixed, it becomes a matter of custom and can be called appropriate, but if their meaning is not agreed upon, then it is deemed inappropriate. Names have no intrinsic actualities. Their meaning is agreed upon by the act of giving a name to a certain actuality. If this agreement becomes fixed, it becomes a matter of custom and can they be deemed the name of this reality. Names do have intrinsic goodness. If they are straightforward, easy [to use] and are not at odds [with the overall system], then they are deemed good names. (Wang, 1988, p. 420)

While there is, without a doubt, a degree of resemblance between the argument made in this passage and the nominalist position in Western philosophy of language, I would argue that this statement must not be read as an abstract reflection on the nature of language but as a pragmatic outline for language reform. Names have no intrinsic appropriateness or goodness since, as individual words, they have no meaning and no worth. Words can be deemed good only in relation to each other, good in

virtue of their contribution to the total integrity of the linguistic system, and a system can only be internally consistent if it is controlled by a singly authority and not multiple philosophical visionaries (Goldin, 1999, p. 145; Long, 1987, pp. 107–126). Maintaining this coherence is therefore the ruler's most important task. Language creates knowledge, and knowledge constitutes power.

Linguistic engineering is the fundamental apparatus of knowledge and power since it also allows the ruler to assert his authority in a noncoercive fashion and guarantees sociopolitical stability. We must keep in mind, however, that in early China, politics, governing the profane human realm, is never divorced from the realm of the sacred. For this reason, Xunzi had to situate his administrative technique of language in an overarching religiopolitical framework. He accomplished this task by postulating two models of rulership: the sage-rulers of the ancient past and the just rulers of the recent past. In an attempt to provide a rationale for his belief that only centralized control can augment the state's institutions of power thereby guaranteeing sociopolitical order, Xunzi resorted to a growingly common strategy—depicting the ruler as a semidivine figure with unique access to certain modes of knowledge that sets him apart from others. As sages, Former Kings had unique access to esoteric knowledge, the patterns of the Way, which they obtained through a rigorous process of self-cultivation and bio-spiritual transformation. Their prefect linguistic system was created based on this knowledge. The Later Kings, however, while not sagacious, still have the authority to rule since they are the ones who properly inherited the language of their predecessors, understood its proper relation to the world of things, and have presently rectified it, only when necessary, for the specific circumstances of the present.

Positing the ruler as the sole administrator and preserver of order allowed Xunzi to advance two corresponding goals. First, by giving rulers sole control over the linguistic system, including the definition of what it means to be a true ruler 王者 (*wangzhe*) or a sage-ruler 聖王 (*shengwang*), he made his philosophy attractive to potential rulers. It is hardly surprising, then, that when King Zheng of Qin, whose chief advisor Li Si was one of Xunzi's most infamous students, unified the various Warring States under one rule, his project of centralization included the adoption of a new title for himself—the First Emperor 始皇帝 (*shi huangdi*). Read in the context of Xunzi's theory of language, this seemingly symbolic act reveals itself as a conscious attempt to establish the authority of the new ruler by reinstating the title used by the mythical sage-rulers of the remote past. Second, Xunzi's theory of language advanced his other goal of restraining the power of the ruler by emphasizing his immense responsibilities as the caretaker of the human realm charged with the physical, moral, and spiritual welfare of his people. Managing the linguistic realm, the theory suggests, was a fundamental step through which the ruler fulfilled his cosmic vocation. Moreover, Xunzi also draws attention to the fact that despite his lofty position as administrator and caretaker, the government involves the delegation of authority based on a clear demarcation of names and deeds—creating the proper discourse to facilitate the smooth running of the bureaucratic machine. The influence of Xunzi's theory of linguistic engineering on the bureaucratic system, which became the trademark of

Chinese imperial rule, thus posits him as one of the most prominent thinkers in Chinese history.

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Notes

- [1] All translations from the *Xunzi* are mine.
- [2] On the problematic nature of the category of Legalism, see Goldin (2011b).
- [3] Emendations to Creel's translation are mine.

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