

# Xunzi's Theory of Ritual Revisited: Reading Ritual as Corporal Technology

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**Abstract** This essay offers a new reading of Xunzi's ritual theory against the backdrop of excavated technical manuals from the Mawangdui and Zhangjiashan collections. While most studies tend to focus on the sociopolitical and moral aspects of Xunzi's thought, I attempt to demonstrate that in composing his theory of ritual, Xunzi was not only concerned with defending the Confucian tradition against the criticism of his fellow philosophical masters, but was also responding to the emergence of bio-spiritual practices such as meditation, sexual cultivation, and gymnastic exercises. Alarmed by the growing popularity of these individual corporal techniques among the Warring States elite, Xunzi opted to repackage and redefine ritual as a superior technology of the body that would enable humans to transform their bodies and minds and obtain physical and spiritual bounties while at the same time enhancing sociopolitical stability and harmony by creating an organic communal body.

**Keywords** Xunzi · Ritual · Music · Corporal Technologies · Excavated Manuscripts

## 1

The Warring States period (453–211 BCE) is traditionally known as the age of the “Hundred Schools of Thought,” an era in which new ideas about the self and its relationships with social and political institutions found articulation in a growing corpus of philosophical literature. Recent archaeological excavations, however, have problematized our previous notions of this formative period by revealing the existence of another flourishing literary tradition comprised of technical manuals that offer us a glimpse into the realm of “natural experts,” namely religious adepts, astrologers, physicians, and diviners, who, just like the philosophical masters, were “vital participants in the intellectual and spiritual ferment of the Warring States period” (Harper 1999: 814).

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In this essay I will suggest a new reading of the theory of ritual found in the writings of the Confucian thinker Xunzi 荀子 (c. 310–218 BCE) that takes into account new information on Warring States physical self-cultivation practices contained in excavated technical literature such as the Mawangdui 馬王堆 and Zhangjiashan 張家山 manuscripts. While most studies tend to focus on the sociopolitical and ethical aspects of Xunzi's ritual theory (See Campamy 1992 and Sato 2003),<sup>1</sup> I will argue that in composing his theory of ritual, Xunzi was not only responding to philosophical attacks regarding the efficacy of the old ritual system of the Zhou 周 (1045–711 BCE) but to a newly evolving realm of practice. The growing popularity of rivaling “technologies of the body” among the Warring States elite posed a threat to Xunzi's ultimate aim of harmonious sociopolitical order and thus he took it upon himself to redefine the old ritual system by repackaging ritual as an alternative technology of the body superior to those advocated by his rivals.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 Technologies of the Body in Early China

Before turning to an analysis of Xunzi's redefinition of ritual, we must first understand the nature of the threat he was facing—the growing popularity of corporal technologies among the Warring States elite. Prior to the excavation of the silk manuscripts in Mawangdui tomb no.3 in 1973 and the bamboo manuscripts in Zhangjiashan tomb no. 247 in 1983, information about bio-spiritual practices in the Warring States period was limited.<sup>3</sup> In these texts, however, we find detailed descriptions of a variety of corporal technologies such as meditation, ritualized sexual intercourse, and gymnastic exercises, as well as references to the theoretical foundation behind these practices.

While the Mawangdui and Zhangjiashan tombs date back to the 2nd century BCE, many scholars believe that the ideas and practices they contain were already circulating among the educated elite in the 3rd century BCE (Harper 1998: 111, Lo 2007: 383–384). When read alongside received sources, one immediately notices a shared notion of bodily processes and mechanisms and a reoccurrence of several technical phrases and terms in both technical and philosophical texts. This new data has led to the realization that the level of cross-fertilization between the two traditions might be much higher than previously thought (Kalinowski 2004). A close reading of Xunzi's theory of ritual, I argue, confirms this hypothesis. Xunzi's use of technical terms such

<sup>1</sup> Yuri Pines, for example, argues that for Xunzi, ritual functions on two levels: on the personal level as a tool for moral self-cultivation and on the social level as a guiding code of conduct, a mechanism to ensure harmonious interaction between individuals in society (Pines 2000: 34–37).

<sup>2</sup> I borrow this term from Michel Foucault's analysis of physical and mental exercises practiced in ancient Greece. See Foucault 1988. Using this term, however, does not imply that I see a direct correlation between early Chinese and Greek self-cultivation practices. The task of comparing these two traditions, while potentially fruitful, lies outside the scope of this article.

<sup>3</sup> A few passages in the *Zhuangzi* contain terse references to such bio-spiritual practices as “fasting of the mind” (*xin zhai* 心齋) and “sitting and forgetting” (*zuo wang* 坐忘). In his study of the *Internal Enterprise* (*Neiye*, 內業) essay found in the eclectic compilation the *Guanzi* 管子, Harold Roth offers a reading of the text as a meditation manual (Roth 1999). A recently excavated jade artifact dating back to the Warring States period contains a short description of a bodily technique called “circulating *qi*,” which alludes to the practice of controlled breathing and saliva swallowing but not much more (Li 2000: 343).

as blood (*xue* 血), *qi* 氣, and spirit (*shen* 神) and his elaborate discussion on the effects of ritual participation on the human body suggest that he was acquainted with the ancillary literary tradition associated with the aforementioned technologies of the body. In the following pages I will draw on key passages from such texts as the *Ten Questions* (*Shiwen* 十問) from Mawangdui and the *Stretching Book* (*Yinshu* 引書) from Zhangjiashan in order to elucidate the corporal aspects of Xunzi's theory of ritual, mainly his notions of ritualized education and the transformative nature of ritual participation.

### 3 Xunzi and his Rivals

Before proceeding to textual comparison, let us look at internal evidence for Xunzi's enmity for the advocate of individual corporal technologies. In chapter six, "Against Twelve Masters," Xunzi openly attacks the theories and practices of his rivals. In addition to his criticism of the theories of well-known masters such as Mozi 墨子 and Mencius 孟子, Xunzi also challenges the philosophical assumptions advocated by the following four thinkers:

Some pander to their dispositions and inborn nature, are content with following each and every whim, and behave like the birds and beasts... [Such people are like] TUO Xiao and WEI Mou.... Some suppress their dispositions and inborn nature and travel to far gorges and climb remote mountains as if separating themselves from others will make them superior... [Such people are like] CHEN Zhong and SHI Qiu. (*Xunzi* 6/21/13-6/21/17)<sup>4</sup>

Admittedly, not much is known about these individuals.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, their teachings posed a big enough threat for Xunzi to attack them personally, alongside his criticism of well-known figures such as Mozi and Mencius. Later in the chapter, he bemoans the growing popularity of bodily techniques advocated by such recluses and accuses them of fake and self-indulgent behavior. It is important to note, however, that Xunzi is not questioning the efficacy of their corporal technologies but the threat they represent for his ideal of a social and civilized lifestyle. Lured by the material and spiritual bounty promised by these recluses and their techniques, the educated elite might be distracted away from a life of moral self-cultivation and social harmony. Alarmed by this potential threat, Xunzi opts to present a new theory of self-cultivation that offers similar individual rewards while also strengthening social order and cohesion.

<sup>4</sup> The index numbers (Book/Page/Line) refer to the ICS concordance edited by D.C. Lau and F.C. Chen (Lao and Chen 1996).

<sup>5</sup> TUO Xiao is not mentioned in any other Warring States sources. WEI Mou appears briefly in the 28th chapter of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, "Abdicating Kingship," as a recluse who lived in the mountains (Mair 1998: 293). CHEN Zhong appears in *Mencius* 3B15 as an ascetic famous for abstaining from food and drink. In chapter three of the *Xunzi*, Chen and Shi are described as "robbers of reputation," a type of person who causes chaos by leading men in the wrong direction and is worse than a mere robber of things (*Xunzi* 3/12/12-3/12/13).

#### 4 Self-cultivation as Corporal Education

Xunzi's theory of human nature is probably the most well-known and well-studied facet of his thought. Recent studies, however, argue that his assertion that "human nature is bad" should not be taken as a claim about the incorrigible and inherent evilness of human beings but as an acceptance of the human condition and an affirmation of humans' potential for improvement (Kupperman 2000: 93-100). Humans, argues Xunzi, are born as egocentric beings filled with unquenchable desire. Their need to fulfill this desire leads them to behave in an anti-social manner, stepping over others in their quest to satisfy their cravings at others' expense. This natural state of affairs, however, is not irrevocable. Along with their inborn nature (*xing* 性) and dispositions (*qing* 情), humans are also born with an ability to think reasonably and devise tools that can help them out of this unfortunate situation that leads only to chaos and strife. The most important of these tools, claims Xunzi, is the emulation of external models:

If you have no teacher or model, you will sing the praises of inborn nature, but if you have them, you will sing the praises of accumulated effort. Becoming a teacher and having a model is something that is reached through accumulated effort and not simply something received from one's inborn nature since it is insufficient for establishing oneself and achieving order. Inborn nature is what I cannot make but can only transform. Accumulated effort is what I do not [naturally] have but can create. It is through paying attention to deportment and habituation of custom that one's inborn nature can be transformed. By being resolute and avoid being of two minds accumulated effort is perfected. The habituation of custom alters the consciousness and when it is pacified for a long time, the character is altered. By being resolute and avoid being of two minds, one can penetrate Divine Insight and form a triad with Heaven and Earth. (*Xunzi* 8/33/18-8/34/2)

Following an external model, argues Xunzi, is our way of asserting our personhood and fulfilling our potential. Utilizing the tools we are given by these external sources and combining them with a resolute decision not to waver allows us to transform our inborn nature and alter our character, creating what we might call a second or artificial nature (*wei* 偽) (Lau 2000: 188-219, Cook 1997: 20). The moral aspect of this process has been given much scholarly attention, especially by those who wished to discuss Xunzi's philosophy in the context of modern ethical discourse (Wong 2000). Creating this second nature, however, seems to also entail a distinct corporal aspect. In addition to a strong moral commitment, altering one's character also involves paying attention to physical deportment and re-shaping the mind and bodily functions.

Education, argues Xunzi, involves the internalization of external sources through the medium of the body. It enters the body through the senses, is interpreted and mediated by the mind, and then spreads through the entire body of the gentleman (*junzi* 君子), influencing his behavior and even his outer appearance. The corporal dimension of this process is articulated in the final section of the "Encouraging Learning" chapter:

[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. (*Xunzi*, 1/4/17-1/4/19)

The training of both sense organs and the mind that controls them induces a complete bodily transformation. The trained gentleman is actually able to perceive, understand, and enjoy the world in a way that is qualitatively different from others. In another passage, Xunzi describes this process as “accumulating goodness” (*ji shan* 積善):

If you accumulate enough dirt to create a mountain, wind and rain will arise from it. If you accumulate enough water to create a deep pool, water dragons will be born in it. If you accumulate enough goodness to make your Inner Power complete, Divine Insight will be acquired of itself and one will be equipped with a sagely mind. (*Xunzi* 1/2/9-1/2/10)

At first glance, the process of accumulating goodness might seem to be exclusively ethical in nature, an accretion of good and moral deeds that leads to a virtuous character. It is important to note, however, that much like in the passage quoted above, the end result of this transformative process is described as the achievement of Divine Insight (*shenming* 神明). This term appears in both philosophical and technical sources and seems to have two main meanings: it either refers to actual divine spirit or it indicates an altered state of consciousness that allows humans to communicate with the divine realm and enjoy god-like insight (Szabó 2003). In the aforementioned *Ten Question* essay from the Mawangdui corpus, Divine Insight is mentioned in connection with ritualized sexual intercourse:

[This is] the way of yin intercourse: when you make your heart solid and steadfast, your physical form and the *qi* will secure each other. Thus it is said: with your first entrance without dissemination, your hearing will become acute and your vision clear. With the second entrance without dissemination, your voice and *qi* will be lofty and strident. With the third entrance without dissemination, your skin will start to glow.... With the seventh entrance without dissemination, your whole body will be harm-free. With the eighth entrance without dissemination, you will be able to prolong your life. With the ninth entrance without dissemination, you penetrate into Divine Insight. (*MSVI.A.3*, translation adapted from Harper 1998: 391)

Reaching the state of Divine Insight is thus portrayed as the end result of sexual intercourse. In this version of ritualized intercourse, however, the moment of physical sexual climax is replaced by another type of ecstatic culmination—a complete bodily transformation that brings forth an altered state of consciousness, opening new lines of communication with the realm of the divine. This type of corporal technology brings the individual closer to the spirits and deities and even allows him to attain a divine-like status, evident by his glowing skin, heightened sense perception, and ability

to exceed his natural lifespan.<sup>6</sup> The profusion of such descriptions in Warring States literature is taken by Michael Puett as an example of a broader cultural phenomenon – the rise of ideas of self-divinization.

According to Puett's thought-provoking theory, the emergence of new cosmological notions in the 4th century BCE broke the impenetrable barrier between the human and divine realms. According to these new assumptions, since the whole world, including human beings and their bodies, is made of *qi*, learning to control one's *qi* will enable the adept to control the world and assume powers that were previously attributed only to external deities. The authors of self-cultivation manuals, concludes Puett, were thus teaching adepts how to "usurp powers that otherwise belong to spirits and to usurp abilities that ritual specialists claim as their own" (Puett 2002: 115–116).<sup>7</sup>

Puett's ideas regarding the rise of self-divinization claims in the late Warring States period are undoubtedly controversial.<sup>8</sup> Yet, Xunzi's use of the technical terminology found in recently excavated manuscripts might suggest his acknowledgement of the growing popularity of these corporal technologies aimed at self-divinization. Moreover, while Mencius invests much effort in defining precisely what he means by cultivating *qi*, Xunzi uses this term matter-of-factly. This might suggest that by the 3rd century BCE, the rising popularity of self-divinization theories and practices made the technical terms associated with them common enough for Xunzi to use them freely without any need for detailed explanations. Alarmed by this new development and the danger it represented to his philosophical agenda, Xunzi chose to use this shared vocabulary in order to depict his own process of self-cultivation as a technology of the body superior to those advocated by his rivals. This is evident in the opening paragraphs of his second chapter, "Self-Cultivation," where he introduces his technique of self-cultivation—the accumulation of goodness:

When one identifies the measure of goodness and uses it to control his *qi* and nourish life, he will live longer than Ancestor Peng. When he uses it to cultivate his body and make a name for himself, he will become equal to Yao and Yu. Ritual and trustworthiness are appropriate when the times are good and useful when one has to dwell in poverty. Generally speaking, when one's blood and *qi*, consciousness and ideas, thoughts and reflections are all ordered according to ritual, he will succeed. But when this is not the case, he will become unpredictable and chaotic, sluggish and rude. When one's choice of food and drink, clothing, habitation, actions and repose all follow ritual prescriptions, they will be harmonious and regulated. But when this is not the case, he will be

<sup>6</sup> On the unique perception of the sage in early China, see Brown and Bergeton 2008. According to Mark Csikszentmihalyi, features like a "glossy coloration" and "jade-like physical appearance" were already well-established signs of sagacity and transcendence by the 4th century BCE. See Csikszentmihalyi 2004: 127.

<sup>7</sup> Xunzi was not the first philosophical master to respond to this newly evolving realm of practice. See, for example, the discussion on flood-like *qi* in *Mencius* 2A2, which contains similar terminology to that which can be found in technical texts such as the *Internal Enterprise*. According to Paul Goldin, Mencius is using this term precisely since it was popularized by contemporary advocates of physical self-cultivation. By situating *qi* cultivation in the realm of moral practice, he argues, Mencius is able to argue that "morality is good for your health" (Goldin 2011: 42).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the issues raised by Lothar von Falkenhausen in his review of Puett's book (von Falkenhausen 2004).

ensnared in traps and fall ill. When one's deportment and appearance, demeanor and measure, the way he enters a room and the way he excuses himself, and the way he measures his steps while walking all follow ritual prescriptions, they will be refined. But when this is not the case, he will become arrogant and vulgar, boorish and perverse, common and uncouth. Thus, a man without ritual will not live, an undertaking lacking ritual will not be accomplished, and a state without ritual will not be tranquil. (*Xunzi* 2/5/11-2/5/12)

"Identifying the measure of goodness" is presented here as a technology of the body, a way to control one's *qi* and nourish life (*yangsheng* 養生). Xunzi's claim that pursuing this path will allow one to live longer than Ancestor Peng (*Pengzu* 彭祖) reiterates the fact that he is targeting the same audience of educated elite fascinated with corporal technologies. Ancestor Peng is a mythical figure specifically associated with a tradition of nourishing life and longevity called "guiding and stretching" (*daoyin* 導引), usually translated as gymnastics (Despeux 2004). In addition to being one of the protagonists of the *Ten Questions*, Ancestor Peng is mentioned in the *Zhuangzi* as the role-model for those who use a variety of breathing and gymnastics exercises to cultivate their physical form and elongate their lives (Mair 1998:145). Moreover, the opening lines of the newly excavated *Stretching Book* from the Zhangjiashan state that the techniques described in the text all represent the tradition of Ancestor Peng.<sup>9</sup>

By the late Warring States period Ancestor Peng was strongly associated with the quest for physical health and longevity. By claiming that his corporal technology allows one to live longer than Ancestor Peng's, Xunzi is asserting the superiority of his own way over that of his rivals. Additionally, this passage gives us a clear indication of something only insinuated in previous passages: Xunzi's proposed technology of the body comes in the form of ritual.

## 5 Nourishing Life, Harmonizing *Qi*, and the Technology of Ritual

The notion of ritual as a prescriptive physical regimen that must be strictly followed in daily life was not invented by Xunzi. The tenth chapter of the *Analects* (*Lunyu*, 論語) contains extensive descriptions of Confucius's deportment and demeanor during various ritual events. In chapter twelve we find this well-known statement:

Yan Yuan asked about humaneness. The Master said: "To return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self constitutes humaneness. If for a single day man could return to the observance of the rites through overcoming himself, then all under Heaven would consider humaneness to be his. However, being humane depends on oneself alone. How can it depend on others?" Yan Yuan said: "May you provide me with a list [of ritual stipulations]?" The Master said: "Do not look unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not listen unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not speak unless it is in accordance with the

<sup>9</sup> This statement has led some scholars to hypothesize that the text is in fact the long lost *Classic on Ancestor Peng's Cultivation of the Innate Nature* (*Pengzu Yangxing Jing* 彭祖養性經) mentioned in later bibliographical treatises (Li 2000: 348).



rites; do not move unless it is in accordance with the rites.” Yan Yuan said: “although I am dull witted, I shall direct my efforts towards what you have said.” (*Analects* 12.1, Yang 2007:123)

This notion of ritual as a prescriptive set of corporal instructions used to re-shape and transform one’s behavior and deportment was thus well-known in Xunzi’s time.<sup>10</sup> His own innovation was to present it as a prescriptive technology one should follow to the letter not only to become moral and humane (*ren* 仁) but in order to improve health and prolong life. Writing for a new generation of readers with new interests and desires, Xunzi opts to direct their attention to the therapeutic qualities of ritual. In the *Stretching Book*, we find the following instructions:

[You] must perform the Eight Principles stretching, blow out and breathe in the vital essence and *qi* of Heaven and Earth, extend your abdomen and straighten your waist, forcefully extend your arms and legs, push down your heels and curve your toes... thus you will be able to avoid disease.... People live their lives following their dispositions and do not know how to cherish their *qi*. For this reason they contract many diseases and are quick to die. The reason why people’s [bodies] tend to deteriorate and why their yin [i.e. genitals] tends to prematurely wane is due to their inability to control their *qi*. Being able to effectively control their *qi* and honor their yin, they will benefit their bodies. (Gao 1995:167)

This passage describes a medical regimen aimed at ordering the flow of *qi* in one’s body through a combination of breath exercises, physical movements, and sexual techniques. The same, argues Xunzi, can be achieved by abiding to a strict ritualized lifestyle:

Techniques for ordering *qi* and nourishing the mind: If your blood and *qi* are too strong and obdurate, soften it with equilibrium and harmony. If your knowledge and thoughts are too veiled and deep, unify them with ease and goodness. If your [feelings of] bravery and courage are too fierce and aggressive, help them with guidance and acquiescence. If you are too hasty and flippant [in your behavior], regulate it in your activity and rest. If you become too narrow-minded and petty, broaden yourself with magnanimity and greatness.... If you are unwisely sincere and ploddingly honest, conform yourself with ritual and music.... Of all of these techniques for ordering *qi* and nourishing the mind, none is more direct than following ritual. (*Xunzi* 2/6/6-2/6/10)

Ritual, argues Xunzi, is the most efficacious tool for controlling one’s *qi* and balancing and harmonizing emotions and desires. The sensory and physical satisfaction achieved by ritual participation thus functions not only as a therapy of desires (Kline 2006), but also induces a physical and cognitive transformation, which nourishes both body and mind and provides medical and spiritual bounties. The notion of nourishment is best attested in the famous opening passage of the “Discourse on Ritual” chapter:

Ritual means to nourish. The flesh of grass-fed and grain-fed animals, rice and millet, properly blended to create the five flavors nourish the mouth. The aromas

<sup>10</sup> A similar passage can be found in an excavated manuscript from the Shanghai Museum Collection, titled *The Gentleman’s Performance of Ritual* (*Junzi Weili* 君子為禮).



and fragrances of spice and orchids nourish the nose. The polished and chiseled [ritual jades], carved and engraved [ritual artifacts], and patterned and embroidered [ritual gowns] nourish the eyes. The sound of the bells and drums, pitch-pipes and chime stones, string and wind instruments nourish the ears. The brightly lit halls, veiled chambers, rush mats, bed mats, and ceremonial stall mats nourish the body. Therefore, ritual means to nourish. (*Xunzi* 19/90/5-19/90/8)

Xunzi provides us with a vivid description of a ritual scene laden with components that are ritualistic in nature, such as jade artifacts, musical instruments, and special mats. These objects are time and place specific and thus have a special influence on each of the five senses. In a way, ritual participation provides one with a transformative experience in which regular sense perception is replaced and even surpassed. Its distinct choreographed and regulated nature thus produces a corporal experience that is better than any regular daily experience of desire satisfaction. As we recall, in the “Encouraging Learning” chapter, Xunzi states that at the end of his training process a gentleman is able to find even greater pleasure in the world. When read alongside this passage, it can be deduced that the bodily transformation that leads a person to perceive the world differently is connected to the aesthetic quality of the ritual experience.

Ritual, argues Xunzi, provides a way to gratify the senses in a controlled setting and with a clear agenda in mind. Far from being a mere frivolous satisfaction of desire, ritual provides meaningful experience that induces change and is accompanied by a sense of pleasure that is much greater than simple carnal joy. By promising the reader the same rewards other technologies of the body offer, such as improved health and acute sense perception, Xunzi thus provides a new motivation for upholding the ritual prescriptions of the past.

## 6 Music, Dance, and Altered States of Consciousness

Xunzi's focus on the aesthetic aspects of the ritual experience raises an important issue – the scope of the term “ritual.” While the English word ritual is typically used to translate the Chinese term *li* 禮, the semantic field of the modern category of ritual is much broader. The emergence of ritual studies as an interdisciplinary academic field in the last few decades has transformed our former understanding of ritual by illuminating its performative and corporal aspects (Bell 1997). Most recently, new developments in the field of cognitive science have propelled scholars of religion to try and trace the specific cognitive mechanisms that espouse divergent modes of religiosity or to explain the efficacy of collective rituals from an evolutionary standpoint.<sup>11</sup>

These new directions and approaches in the field of ritual studies make it hard to treat the words ritual and *li* as interchangeable. Yuri Pines's study of the development of this term shows that the collapse of the Zhou world order prompted Warring States

<sup>11</sup> Harvey Whitehouse, for example, connects his two main modes of religiosity, doctrinal and imagistic, to two mechanisms of long-term memory: semantic vs. episodic or autobiographical memory (Whitehouse 2004: 63–85). Pascal Boyer and Pierre Liénard, on the other hand, attempt to make sense of ritual from an evolutionary perspective and conclude that ritual is a “highly successful cultural gadget” that triggers certain motivation systems and cognitive processes necessary for human survival (Boyer and Liénard 2006).

thinkers to distill certain aspects of the normative system of *li* from its former religious and ceremonial framework and charge it with new social and political implications (Pines 2000: 7). Xunzi's use of the term supports this claim. He often refers to *li* as a useful tool of government and argues that adherence to its prescriptions will guarantee social cohesion and harmony, but he rarely uses it in connection with corporality. When he wishes to emphasize the aesthetic dimension of ritual experience, Xunzi often refers to yet another concept closely associated with *li*—*yue* 樂.

While *yue* is usually rendered as “music,” the term actually covers a whole genre of audio-visual performance that synthesizes music, dance, and other ancillary props in a ritual setting.<sup>12</sup> These ritual performances, which can be traced back to shamanistic dances that date at least to the Neolithic period, were institutionalized during the Shang and the Zhou and in the Warring States period were performed on a regular basis in royal courts. Growing interest in the human body and rising popularity of corporal technologies in the Warring States period, however, stirred new interest in these traditional ritual performances and their effect on the human body and psyche (Brindley 2006).

Many of the physical exercises described in the *Stretching Book* are given names associated with animals, such as “tiger twists” and “bear strides.” In the *Guiding and Stretching Diagram* (*Daoyin Tu* 導引圖), a silk painting found in the Mawangdui corpus that contains illustrations of gymnastic poses along with their proper names, we find others such as “dragon mounting” and “gibbon shouting.”<sup>13</sup> In his study of the connection between the animal kingdom and early Chinese notion of music and dance, Roel Sterckx traces the role of such animals in ancient ritual displays. Their skins and shells, he argues, were used to make drums and other instruments. In addition, the ritual experts also used feathers and hides as decoration and mimicked animal moves during rituals in an attempt to transform themselves into certain animals and gain their special powers (Sterckx 2002: 128). With the growing popularity of corporal technologies in the Warring States period, ritualistic moves used in religious ceremonies were imported into the realm of individual praxis in the form of gymnastic poses (Gao 1995: 23–24).

The ongoing process represented a real threat to the old ritual order Xunzi wished to protect and led him to develop a new theory of ritual and music that was more appropriate to the changing intellectual climate of the late Warring States period. Witnessing the growing popularity of corporal technologies among the Warring States elite, Xunzi opted to focus on the potential of music and ritual in inducing a transformative experience to enable one to develop a relationship with the divine. This agenda is conveyed in the opening lines of the “Discourse on Music” chapter:

Music is joy, an intrinsic part of human dispositions. Since man is unable to exist without joy, he cannot but manifest it through sounds and tones and form it through his actions and his repose. And, as for the Way of human beings, the

<sup>12</sup> In the conclusion to her study of the epistemology of the senses in early China, Jane Geaney suggests that uncovering the importance of aural and visual pairings in Warring States literature can shed light on other frequent pairings such as *yue* and *li*. Accordingly, she proposes to translate *li* as “ritual movements,” thus emphasizing its corporal aspects (Geaney 2002: 174).

<sup>13</sup> Li Xueqin 李學勤 has studied the connection between these two sources and determined that while the names of some exercises in the *Stretching Book* also appear in the *Guiding and Stretching Diagram*, their descriptions do not match the drawings (Li 1991).

vicissitudes of techniques [of transforming] one's innate nature come to an end through these sounds and tones, actions and repose. Humans are unable to exist without joy but this cannot exist without proper form. Moreover, when the form does not correspond to the Way, chaos is unavoidable. The Former Kings, who abhorred such chaos, thus regulated the sounds of the odes and the hymns so they would [correspond to the] Way. By doing so, they made sure that the sounds were adequate to express joy but not too wanton, that the patterns were distinguishable but not apprehensive, that the elaborateness and directness, the complexity and frugality, the purity and viscosity, the rhythm and the beat [of the melody] were adequate to stir one's mind of goodness, and that corrupt and polluted *qi* would not be permitted to settle in it [the mind]. (*Xunzi*, 20/98/14-20/98/18)

As stated before, the sense of pleasure derived from the new way the ritually transformed body perceives the world is particularly important for Xunzi since it provides motivation for following ritual prescriptions. His choice for focusing on the aesthetic audio-visual aspects of ritual performances is thus understandable. Humans, he argues, cannot live without some sort of satisfaction and any regimen that calls for the abolition of desire is thus ultimately destined to fail. Uncurbed satisfaction, however, will also ultimately fail since it will lead to social and political chaos. Ritual is thus a product of this need for a tool that allows humans to enjoy themselves in a structured and long-term manner.

Xunzi's use of *qi* in this passage can be seen as an attempt to show that musical performance is a technology of the body that helps people to properly manifest their dispositions without extinguishing their desires or behaving in an anti-social manner. One of the basic tenets of guiding and stretching is the notion that physical movement can be instrumental in overcoming stagnancy, discarding bad *qi*, and improving the circulation of good *qi*.<sup>14</sup> A similar argument can be found in the following passage from the *Xunzi*:

When one listens to the sounds of the odes and hymns, his consciousness is broadened as a result. When one wields a shield and battle-axe and habituates himself with the choreography of the performance, his deportment and appearance acquire dignity as a result. When one follows the correct steps and coordinates those according to the rhythm and beat, his movements become orderly and his comings and goings are made uniform as a result. (*Xunzi*, 20/99/4-20/99/5)

Ritual musical performances are depicted in this passage as an aesthetic training ground, a unique mode of practice different from everyday activity. Inside ritual time and space, routine gestures and movement take on a special meaning exactly because they are performed out of regular context. In his analysis of the mechanism of ritual, Claude Lévi-Strauss traces its efficacy to two distinct complimentary procedures:

<sup>14</sup> A good example for this idea can be found in *Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lü* (*Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋), 3/2.3, where we find the following assertion: "The reason flowing water does not become putrid and door hinges are not invaded by insects is that they move. *Qi* and physical form are the same way. If the physical form does not move the vital essence will not circulate and if the vital essence does not circulate the *qi* will become stagnant. If it stagnates inside the head, it will produce swelling and vertigo." See Chen 1984: 139.

parceling out and repetition. Parceling each moment in the ritual process as a self-contained unit allows people to assign discriminatory values to the slightest and most subtle difference, thus illuminating the complex nature of reality. Creating such small units with only minute difference between them, however, might inevitably result in a loss of meaning. For this reason, during the ritual process the units are continuously repeated in order to make them more memorable (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 672-673).

Xunzi's depiction of choreographed ritual performances certainly acknowledges these two aspects of ritual and their role in inducing a cognitive and physical transformation. The additional value of his theory, I argue, lies in his unique explanation of the mechanism behind ritual's efficacy. Ritual, much like other technologies of the body, is seen as a device for the regulation of *qi* inside the human body. The level and flow of *qi* inside the body, according to the medical theories that began to appear in the Warring States period, is constantly in flux. In the *Ten Questions*, for example, we find the assertion that the natural depletion of *qi* in the human body is the reason for illness and eventually death (MSVI.A.3, Harper 1998: 389-391). Depletion in *qi* levels, however, is not the only threat to the human body. The opposite condition, an overabundance of *qi*, is considered to be equally threatening. In the *Stretching Book* we find the following statement:

The reason why the nobility contract disease is that their joys and angers are not harmonious. When joyful, yang *qi* is in excess, and when angry, yin *qi* is in excess. On account of this, when those who follow the Way [of Ancestor Peng] are joyful then they quickly exhale, and when they are angry they increasingly puff out, all in order to harmonize [their emotions]. Inhaling the vital essence and *qi* of Heaven and Earth... they are able to be without disease. (Gao 1995: 170)

According this interesting passage, there is a direct link between emotional imbalance and physical illness. Since both mental and corporal processes operate according to the mechanism of *qi*, emotional states can produce a concrete bodily outcome and vice versa. By committing to a regime of guiding and stretching exercises one is thus able to live a balanced life, free of mental anguish and physical disease.

Xunzi's corporal technology, ritual, follows the same basic mechanism of *qi*. One of the main motifs of the "Discourse on Music" chapter is the difference between the depraved musical performances of his time and correct musical performances associated with the golden age of the Zhou. For Xunzi, there is a close correlation between the moral qualities of the ruler, the type of music played in his state, and overall sociopolitical stability. In the following passage, this relationship is explained through the notion of *qi*:

Generally, depraved musical performances arouse man and in response perverse *qi* as a result. When perverse *qi* finds form [in such performances], chaos ensues. Correct musical performances arouse man and concordant *qi* arises as a result. When concordant *qi* finds form [in such performances], order ensues. (Xunzi, 20/100/4-20/100/5)

Xunzi argues that while depraved musical performances elicit the arousal of perverse *qi* (*ni qi* 逆氣), morally correct performances elicit the arousal of concordant *qi* (*shun qi* 順氣). While these two terms have definite moral connotations, the first referring to rebellious behavior and the latter to an obedient attitude, it is important to

note their medical aspects. In the “Foundational Storehouse” chapter of the *Divine Pivot* (*Lingshu* 靈樞) section of the medical compendia the *Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor* (*Huangdi Neijing* 黃帝內經), the two terms refer to the direction of its flow in the meridians. *Qi* moving contrary to the regular course is called perverse *qi*, regarded as a symptom of trouble in the thoroughfare vessels, and is associated with respiratory distress and back pains (Ren 1986: 391).

Xunzi's use of the perverse and concordant metaphors combines these two aspects, weaving medical and moral discourse together. Correct musical performances combine a highly routinized mode of behavior with a variety of audio-visual stimuli that manipulate the flow of *qi* in the body of the practitioner, changing his physical, mental, and emotive make-up. By engaging in a discourse with the advocates of rival corporal technologies, Xunzi is thus able to provide his readers new motivations to follow ritual prescriptions. We must not forget, however, that Xunzi was also engaged in an ongoing debate with his fellow philosophical masters and that his theory or ritual was composed in an attempt to answer their criticism of the Confucian way.

## 7 Ritual as a Cosmic Script

Some of the harshest arguments against ritualistic musical performances can be found in the “Against Music” chapter of the *Mozi*. The great musical extravaganzas upheld by the ruling elite, argues Mozi, pose a great financial burden on state resources and contribute nothing to the welfare of its people. Instead of throwing elaborate shows and grand rituals, he concludes, the ruler must direct his time and effort to tend to the basic daily needs of his subjects, such as food, clothes, and shelter (Watson 1963: 110-116). Xunzi's “Discourse on Music” contains a direct response to Mozi's criticism. In the opening section of this chapter, Xunzi's strategy is to provide negative quotes from the *Mozi* and then refute them by demonstrating the inherent value of music and ritual performances, ending each passage with the rhetorical claim: “how can Mozi object to that!”

The philosophical dispute between Mozi and Xunzi regarding the aesthetical value of music has been the subject of many previous studies. Most scholars agree that the nature of their disagreement can be traced to their definition of utility. While Mozi believes that the role of government is to supply the material needs of its people, Xunzi believes that it should also tend to their moral education as a means for creating a harmonious and stable society (Cook 1997, Wang 2009). Participation in ritualistic musical performances, he argues, might seem like a financial burden, but its long-term effects in transforming the minds and bodies of the people outweigh such immediate concerns.

In order to understand the source of Xunzi's belief in the efficacy of ritual participation, we must turn our attention to the following description of a ritual scene from the “Discourse on Music” chapter:

The gentleman utilizes the bells and drums in order to create correspondence between his consciousness and the Way and the zithers and lutes to gladden his mind. He moves wielding the shield and battle-axe. Adorned with oxtails and plumes, he follows the rhythm of the chime stones and pitch pipes. In his purity

and brilliance he models himself after Heaven, in his greatness and vastness he models himself after Earth, and in his posturing and movements he models himself after the Four Seasons. Thus, when music is performed, his will becomes pure, and when ritual is cultivated his conduct is perfected. His hearing becomes acute and his vision clear, the flowing of his blood and *qi* harmonious and uniform, his practices altered and his customs changed. All under Heaven is made tranquil and everybody join together in the joy of beauty and goodness. (*Xunzi*, 20/100/7-20/100/9)

In this account, the effects of ritualistic musical performances on the human body are made apparent. For *Xunzi*, it is through this type of ritual participation that we come to embody the rite, meaning that it becomes a part of our second or artificial nature. T.C. Kline, in his discussion of *Xunzi*'s theory of ritual, directs our attention to the double role it fulfills. Ritual, he argues, begins with a negative step, one of constraint. It pervades human activity and provides an ideal prescriptive order, a set of external restrictions that need to be internalized. But, emphasizes Kline, while this is a necessary condition for the process of ritualization, it is not a sufficient one. After the constraints are properly internalized and embodied, ritual participation allows us to see the world in a new way. "Ritual practice," concludes Kline, "gives us access to new categories for seeing and evaluating the world both through direct performance of social roles embodied in the ritual order as well as through learning the spoken and symbolic vocabulary and grammar of ritual performance" (Kline 2004: 198-199, 202).

The connection between ritual and performance arts has been a subject of great interest in the field of ritual studies in the last decades. One of the main arguments raised in these studies is the fact that ritual, like a scripted play, is subjunctive, a form of contingent or hypothetical action. Ritual, in this sense, is concerned with the domain of "as-if" rather than "as-is" (Turner 1983: 235). Ritual performances create an alternative version of reality, an order that is self-consciously different from other possible worlds. For *Xunzi*, the highly symbolic and subjunctive nature of ritual is of such major importance that he chooses it as the final conclusion of his "Discourse on Ritual" chapter, claiming that serving the dead as if they were alive and giving visible shape to what is originally formless represents the apex of civilized behavior.

Ritual musical performances, argues *Xunzi*, are highly symbolic. The drum symbolizes Heaven, the bell symbolizes Earth, the chime stone symbolizes water, wind instruments symbolize the heavenly bodies, and the other instruments symbolize the myriad things (*Xunzi* 20/101/1). Moreover, during such performances people actually use the components of the cosmos as models for their mental attitude and bodily movements. By following the ritual script and playing the part of a deity, natural force, or a cultural hero, they are thus able to identify with them and enter into a relationship with the divine.

It is important to note, however, that *Xunzi* does not offer a "give-and-take" explanation of ritual, in which, in the words of Michael Puett, ritual interactions are used to "influence, mollify, and determine the will of the divine powers, to persuade them to grant assistance and to prevent them from making disasters" (Puett 2002: 41). When the performer dons a costume of a cultural hero or deity or when he models his movements on that of Heaven, Earth, or the Four seasons, he is well aware of the subjunctive nature of ritual. The bodily transformation and altered state of consciousness is thus not thought



to be the result of a divine act of felicity but explained in terms of correspondence or attunement to the process of reality.

The nature of the relationship between humans and ultimate reality occupies a central place in Xunzi's work. In his famous "Discourse on Heaven" chapter, Xunzi attempts to clearly distinguish between the natural world and the human world. Each world, he argues, has its own rules and mechanisms, generally designated as the Way. Heaven's Way (*Tiandao* 天道) and the Human Way (*rendao* 人道) are completely separated and there is no way to communicate between the two spheres, let alone manipulate it to our advantage. This is clearly stated in the following opening lines of the chapter:

The movement of Heaven is constant. It does not prevail due to [the actions of] Yao, nor does it perish due to [the actions of] Jie. If you respond to it with orderly [behavior], good fortune will come, but if you respond to it with disorderly [behavior] bad fortune will come. If you work to strengthen the roots and reduce expenses, then Heaven will not be able to drive you to poverty. If you care for sufficient provisions and act in timely manner, then Heaven will not be able to bring sickness upon you. If you cultivate the Way and not be of two minds, then Heaven will not be able to cause you misfortune. Floods and droughts cannot cause hunger and thirst, cold and heat cannot cause sickness, and bizarre and strange occurrences cannot cause bad fortune. (*Xunzi*, 17/79/16-17/979/18)

According to Xunzi, calamities do not arise due to malicious extra-human powers or a disgruntled Heaven. Thus, they cannot be averted through sacrifice and ritual activity or by submitting to the moral directives of Heaven. The only method for avoiding them is first to understand the pattern and movement of Heaven and then to use this acquired knowledge to our advantage. This sort of knowledge is gained by observing the course of Heaven, Earth, and the Four Seasons empirically, recording their configuration, sequence, and movements. Fortunately, claims Xunzi, this task was undertaken by the sage rulers of antiquity, who left us their findings through a set of coded ritual prescriptions based on the patterns of the Way:

Those who cross waterways mark it where it is deep. If the markers are not clear then people will drown. Those who govern people mark the Way. If the markers are not clear then disorder will arise. Ritual is the marker. Opposing ritual is to throw the world into darkness. Casting darkness upon the world will bring great disorder. Thus, when the Way has nothing which is not clear, when different markers are set to distinguish between the inner and the outer and when darkness and light are constant, then the things which cause people to drown would be eradicated. (*Xunzi*, 17/82/22-17/83/1)

Rituals, argues Xunzi, are not arbitrary. They are markers, left by sages, which function as a prescriptive script, a guiding light for the rest of humanity to follow. Based on the one Way, ritual is thus depicted as the only viable method of putting the Way into practice.<sup>15</sup> Xunzi's attitude toward the Way is thus best understood as

<sup>15</sup> Xunzi's belief that the Confucian Way is the only correct one and his claims for a single and universal ontology which corresponds with a single epistemology are best represented in chapters 21, "Dispelling Blindness" and 22, "Rectifying Names." Paul R. Goldin is one of the strongest supporters for the single Way theory (Goldin 2011: 84-86). Kurtis Hagen, on the other hand, describes Xunzi as a constructivist and objects to the single Way ontology suggested by Goldin (Hagen 2007:22-35).



religious reverence. For Xunzi, the Way represents an ideal, the way the universe should be. By piously following its rituals, human beings thus put not only themselves but the entire universe in “a state of godlike order” (Ivanhoe 1991: 317).

## 8 Conclusion

My main goal in this article was to demonstrate that Xunzi’s theory of ritual emerged in part as a response to advocate and practitioners of competing technologies of the body and that one of his aims was to present ritual as a viable alternative to their bio-spiritual practices. By broadening my analysis beyond the scope of *li* to encompass Xunzi’s notions of corporal education, self-cultivation, and musical performances, I have shown that ritual was perceived not only as a tool to serve a sociopolitical agenda but also as a technology of the body to allow one to transform his person, reform his relationship with the divine, and reap spiritual bounties.

The last point brings us to the final conclusion. While I have argued that Xunzi’s theory of ritual should be read not only in the context of the Warring States philosophical debate but also as a product of the newly evolving realm of practice of that time, one cannot ignore the fact that most of the *Xunzi* is dedicated to sociopolitical theory. Xunzi was not only a ritual expert but also a Confucian scholar-official who believed that his doctrine offered the most suitable solution to the problems of his age. His criticism of the potential anti-social ramifications of the technologies of the body offered by his rivals, however, actually allowed him to respond to the anti-ritual claims raised by philosophical masters such as Mozi.

Ritual, claims Xunzi, allows the performer to achieve correspondence to the world both on mental and on the corporal spheres. When he reaches this status, an actual physical change occurs and his senses become acute, his blood flow is improved, and his dispositions are transformed.<sup>16</sup> As opposed to other corporal technologies, which are practiced alone or in pairs, ritual is a communal activity that shapes the bodies of entire populations, not just individuals. In a direct attack against Mozi, Xunzi offers the following passage:

Mozi says: “Musical performances were rejected by the Sage Kings and the Ruists are mistaken in advocating it.” The gentleman considers such claims to be untrue. The Sage Kings found joy in musical performances and deemed it capable of bettering the minds of the people, to stir men deeply, and to alter their practices and change their customs. Therefore, the Former Kings guided the people with ritual and music, and they became harmonious and concordant. (*Xunzi*, 20/99/21–20/99/24)

As opposed to other corporal technologies that only operate on the minds and bodies of individuals, the public and shared nature of ritualistic musical performances enable such experiences to produce bodily transformations on a much broader scale. The intricate and highly choreographed nature of ritual performances involves a large

<sup>16</sup> The specific phrase “his hearing becomes acute and his vision becomes clear (*er mu cong ming* 耳目聰明),” which is frequently used in technical texts such as the *Internal Enterprise* and the *Ten Questions*, is also used by Xunzi on multiple occasions.

number of participants and a great deal of coordination, but since everyone knows their place and each movement is thoroughly rehearsed, the final outcome is that of smoothness and concordance, as if the entire community constitutes one organic body. By adopting this strategy, Xunzi is able to kill two birds with one stone. By stressing the superior quality and the long-term effects of the physical and spiritual bounties achieved by ritual participation, Xunzi deflects the attacks of the natural experts, and by emphasizing the value of ritual in creating an organic communal body, he offers it as a legitimate cure for the sociopolitical ailments of his time.

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