



## Human in Xunzi's Socio-Political Thought: Implications for Educational Reform in Vietnam

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### ABSTRACT

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This study examines Xunzi's philosophy on humanity and its relevance to contemporary educational reform in Vietnam. Xunzi, 荀子 (316–237 BCE), a prominent philosopher of ancient China, is known for his assertion that “*human nature is inherently evil.*” His socio-political philosophy emphasizes the role of education in shaping human character and fostering social order. Through a materialist perspective, Xunzi proposed methods such as self-cultivation, adherence to moral principles, and active engagement in society as pathways to achieving individual and societal harmony. The study highlights the historical significance of Xunzi's ideas in addressing modern educational challenges in Vietnam, including the identification and development of talent, the prioritization of moral education, the central role of teachers, and the implementation of diverse and dynamic teaching methods. The findings suggest that Xunzi's philosophical insights offer valuable lessons for building an education system that aligns with the principles of equity, innovation, and moral integrity in a rapidly changing society.

### KEYWORDS:

Xunzi, humanity, human nature, evil.

### INTRODUCTION

Philosophy, as a form of social consciousness, always emerges, develops, and is influenced by the social conditions that give rise to it. In alignment with this principle, Xunzi's socio-political philosophy is intrinsically tied to and shaped by the societal conditions of China during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (Cao, 2024; Nguyen & Cao, 2022). These were tumultuous historical times that witnessed the emergence and growth of nearly all major Chinese philosophical schools.

To stabilize society, the Zhou dynasty adopted the governing methods of preceding dynasties while introducing the concept of “ritual” (li) to maintain order. Previously, “ritual” was primarily used in sacrificial ceremonies and to explain the way of humanity through the harmony of heaven and earth. However, under the Zhou, “ritual” was employed to cultivate human nature, thereby establishing a shared moral standard for society as a whole. With the advent of “ritual,” the Zhou dynasty's clan-based legal system became a societal constant (Doan, 2010, p. 562). Society under the Zhou saw a clear

stratification of social hierarchies, expressed in all relationships—ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, friends, and brothers—using “ritual” as the measure of conduct.

Societal transformations rendered the Zhou king's authority largely nominal. While rituals, music, and punishments once emanated from the Zhou king, they were now dictated by the feudal states. The Zhou weakened, rituals and music deteriorated, and the feudal lords rose in power. Although nominally the ruler of these states, the Zhou king's power waned significantly. Conflicts between ruling classes and the oppressed, as well as among the ruling classes themselves, became increasingly severe, plunging the populace into hardship and resentment. Social order collapsed—kings no longer acted as kings, and subjects no longer acted as subjects. Instances of ministers overthrowing kings, sons betraying fathers, wives harming husbands, and siblings turning against each other were no longer uncommon but occurred regularly.

In this context, Xunzi's philosophy emerged as the reaction of a thinker to the conditions of his time. Like other philosophers, Xunzi was deeply concerned with identifying a social structure that would bring the greatest benefits to humanity. His inquiry began with an exploration of humanity and human nature.

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## **1. Some Fundamental Aspects of Xunzi's Views on Humanity**

### **Human nature**

Human nature is the essential characteristic that distinctly separates humans from animals. The distinction lies in humanity's ability to form human nature in relation to the community and society. Xunzi's perspective on human nature contrasts with Confucius and Mencius's belief in the innate goodness of humanity. Throughout the development of feudalism in China, the idea that human nature is inherently good became a standard of feudal morality. The feudal ruling class used this concept as a basis for moral education, aiming to maintain their dominant position and subjugate the populace.

In opposition to such idealist views, Xunzi proposed a rich and diverse materialist perspective on human nature. He argued that humans differ from animals through their sense of "righteousness" and their capacity for "unity," enabling them to dominate animals. Xunzi asserted that humans are distinct from animals because of their ability to labor. Through labor, humans cultivate crops for food, weave cloth for clothing, and build houses for shelter. In contrast, animals rely on their fur for clothing and depend on nature for food and drink, lacking the capacity to create their necessities. This progressive viewpoint reflects Xunzi's background as a representative of the working class, particularly artisans, recognizing the critical role of labor in shaping human nature. In the Qing dynasty, Dai Zhen expanded on this notion, emphasizing that humans differ from animals by replacing instinct with consciousness.

### **Human disposition**

Chinese philosophers have long studied human disposition, offering contrasting views. This reflects one of the distinct features of Chinese philosophy: its focus on adjusting moral and ethical values to elevate the ideal image of the "gentleman" (junzi). During the Warring States period, Mencius famously posited that "human nature is inherently good" ("Ren zhi chu, xing ben shan"), suggesting that at birth, humans possess the seeds of "benevolence" (ren), "righteousness" (yi), "propriety" (li), and "wisdom" (zhi), along with innate tendencies toward filial piety, loyalty, and respect for elders.

In contrast, Xunzi argued that "human nature is inherently evil" ("Ren zhi chu, xing ben e") (Cao, 2024). To support this view, he explained that humans are inherently driven by desires: the eyes crave beauty, the ears delight in pleasing sounds, the mouth savors delicious tastes, the heart seeks profit, and the body favors comfort and leisure. These desires, coupled with the instinct to pursue benefits and avoid harm, lead to selfishness and cruelty. For instance, the pursuit of profit fosters greed and conflict, undermining respect, deference, and trustworthiness (Nguyen & Ho, 2018). Despite asserting that human nature is evil, Xunzi believed that all individuals could cultivate goodness. Therefore, he

emphasized the need for education and the practice of rites and propriety to transform innate evil into goodness.

Xunzi's doctrine of the "evil nature" of humanity was later inherited and developed by Han Feizi. Han Feizi argued that human nature is inherently evil, characterized by selfishness, greed, and fear of harm. He believed that such traits could lead to societal chaos. Thus, Han Feizi maintained that education alone was insufficient; it needed to be supplemented with strict and rigorous legal systems (fa) and severe punishments to deter humanity's evil tendencies.

Following Xunzi, Gaozi was another thinker who contributed to the discourse on human disposition. Gaozi proposed three key points regarding human nature. First, human nature is "neither good nor evil" ("wu shan wu bu shan"). He explained this idea by stating, "Living is nature; eating, drinking, and reproduction are also nature." For Gaozi, nature represents the fundamental aspect of human and animal existence, expressed through growth and reproduction. Growth sustains individual life, while reproduction ensures the survival of the species. These are instincts rather than moral attributes of goodness or evil.

Second, Gaozi asserted that human nature "can become good or evil." He likened human nature to flowing water, which can be directed eastward or westward depending on how it is guided. In this sense, human nature resembles a blank slate: if filled with good teachings, it develops virtue; if filled with negative influences, it fosters vice. This perspective highlights the pivotal role of education in shaping human character.

Third, Gaozi distinguished between innate qualities ("a priori") and acquired qualities ("a posteriori"). He argued that compassion and kindness are innate, existing within individuals from birth. In contrast, principles such as "reason" (li) and "righteousness" (yi) are acquired through experience and knowledge. Thus, Gaozi concluded that moral qualities are internal, whereas rational and ethical principles are external. As he stated, "Humanity resides within, not without; reason and righteousness reside without, not within" (Nguyen, 2007, p. 20).

By the time of Wang Fuzhi and Dai Zhen, the concept of human nature was further expanded. Wang Fuzhi argued that human nature is not innate but formed after birth, asserting that human nature develops through learning, with each day of life contributing to its formation. Complementing this view, Dai Zhen expanded human nature into three aspects: desires (yu), emotions (qing), and knowledge (zhi). Thus, both Wang Fuzhi and Dai Zhen recognized the natural needs of human nature and emphasized its formation through the interaction between individuals and their social environment. These perspectives represent progressive views on human nature within ancient Chinese philosophy.

Overall, the aforementioned thinkers approached the concept of human nature from a materialist perspective. While their views may differ, they all agreed on the significant role of

education in shaping human nature and guiding it toward goodness.

### **The way of humanity**

Based on his analysis of human essence and nature, Xunzi proposed his perspective on the “way of humanity.” He believed that the way of humanity reflects the relationships between individuals and their families, society, nation, and lineage, as well as hierarchical relationships. Like other Confucian thinkers, Xunzi emphasized the doctrine of “rectifying names and defining roles” to preserve feudal hierarchy and order. He upheld the principles of the “three bonds and five constant virtues,” advocating for the cultivation of benevolence and righteousness (Gian & Nguyen, 2021, p. 447).

### **Human attitude toward society**

Building on his exploration of human essence, nature, and the way of humanity, Xunzi turned to the topic of human attitudes toward politics and society. Ultimately, this is the core of his socio-political philosophy.

Human attitudes toward political and social affairs reflect the spirit of engagement with the world and play a decisive role in determining what individuals should do to leave their mark on the broader development of society. Xunzi advocated for active engagement, urging individuals to integrate themselves into society through the ideal of the junzi (gentleman). The junzi must “cultivate oneself, regulate the family, govern the state, and bring peace to the world.” Therefore, individuals should strive to learn and achieve success, serve as officials to aid the king and save the people. If successful, one should enter public service; if not, one should live in seclusion or pass on knowledge to students.

This perspective is a positive one, promoting self-discipline, competence, and action while emphasizing individual awareness, responsibility, and a sense of mission toward national development.

## **2. The Historical Significance of Xunzi's Philosophy on Humanity for Educational Reform in Vietnam Today**

### **2.1. Identifying and nurturing talent**

Studying Xunzi's socio-political philosophy on humanity reveals that most thinkers sought to depict the image of the junzi (gentleman). Various schools of thought, from Confucianism to Legalism and Daoism, emphasized the junzi as the ideal individual, embodying the core moral virtues of benevolence (ren), righteousness (yi), propriety (li), and wisdom (zhi) to maintain stability in feudal society. The junzi represented the elite of society and the talents of the feudal era. The emphasis on the junzi aimed to educate the populace to accept the rule of the governing class.

This perspective holds immense significance, not only for feudal society but also for modern times. In any society, talented individuals are considered the foundation of the nation, playing a critical role in the survival and prosperity of the people. As we know, “Regardless of the political system,

genuine education always shares the noble mission of nurturing humanity. At the same time, within this common foundation, each era and society imposes specific tasks and requirements on education” (Hoang, 2013, p. 241). Recognizing the vital role of talent in the economic and social development of the country, the Party and State of Vietnam have prioritized identifying, training, nurturing, and utilizing talented individuals, particularly in science and technology, to serve key industries and fields.

With the principle that “The State increases investment while promoting socialization and mobilizing society to support educational development” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2016, p. 132), significant resources have been generated to drive educational development, specifically in the immediate task of training and nurturing talent. The experience of many countries has shown that, in this era, the greatest challenge to achieving such goals is not capital, technology, or resources but talent—the “national essence” that our forebears emphasized.

Only when talent is discovered, trained, and nurtured in a timely manner, enabling individuals to fully contribute to society, can we muster the strength to realize the aspiration of building a modern, prosperous Vietnam and achieving the goal of “a wealthy people, a strong nation, and a fair, democratic, and civilized society.”

### **2.2 Emphasizing moral education**

“Ren” (benevolence) and “Yi” (righteousness) are fundamental and foundational categories in Chinese philosophy, reflecting the deep concern of ancient thinkers with the moral cultivation of individuals. Despite differing interpretations of whether human nature is inherently good or evil, these thinkers agreed on the critical role of education in shaping human character. Xunzi believed that human nature is inherently evil and that individuals must be educated to abandon evil and return to goodness. Conversely, the Legalist school also viewed human nature as evil but argued that this evil could be transformed through education combined with strict laws to guide human behavior.

Inheriting the spirit of emphasizing the role of education, Vietnam's leadership has prioritized moral education as an essential, long-term process for all people. This process requires the active participation and close cooperation of various sectors, levels, organizations, and the entire community. Professor Nguyễn Lâm once wrote, “I believe that in any era, the highest purpose of education is to cultivate individuals with benevolence and righteousness” (Nguyen, 2015, p. 112), underscoring that the essence of education lies in moral instruction. This idea is especially significant in the context of contemporary society.

The market economy, while contributing positively, also reveals certain fundamental limitations: fostering extreme individualism, materialism, and a focus on personal gain at the expense of ethics, conscience, social norms, and public opinion. The lifestyle of indulgence and moral decay, among

other issues, has emerged as challenges. The Party has noted, “We do not attribute all social evils to the market economy. However, objectively speaking, the spontaneous forces of the market economy have encouraged individualism and materialism, leading individuals to prioritize personal and material interests over spiritual values, collective welfare, and long-term benefits” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1998, p. 87).

Additionally, some individuals, families, and society as a whole have underestimated the importance of self-education and moral education. Issues within families, such as unfilial behavior, divorce, and disputes over property, as well as societal problems like prostitution, smuggling, counterfeit goods, gangster-like behavior, and corruption among a significant portion of Party members, highlight this neglect. In education, issues such as the pursuit of superficial achievements, the purchase of degrees, and the erosion of teacher-student ethics have also arisen.

To address these issues, all schools today emphasize the long-standing educational principle: “First learn propriety, then acquire knowledge” (*Tiên học lễ, hậu học văn*) and uphold the tradition of “Respect for teachers and their teachings” (*Tôn sư trọng đạo*). The 13th Party Congress Document (2021) affirmed the need to “Enhance the quality of comprehensive education, especially focusing on education in ideals, revolutionary historical traditions, ethics, lifestyle, creativity, practical skills, industrial discipline, and social responsibility” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, p. 173). In this way, the Party has integrated moral and lifestyle education with ideological and historical education, establishing it as a core mission in the reform of the national education system.

### **2.3 The role of teachers**

When discussing education, one cannot overlook the tradition of “respecting teachers and their teachings” (*tôn sư trọng đạo*). Teachers play a vital role in shaping students who are both virtuous and talented, significantly contributing to the prestige of the education sector. A teacher must not only excel in their subject matter but also possess talent, virtue, and wisdom to guide the “ship of knowledge” to reach all learners. This underscores the profound importance of teachers in the entire educational process. However, in recent years, due to the challenges faced by the education system and changes in social conditions and teaching environments, perceptions of teachers have evolved. The rigid standards of the past can no longer be maintained unchanged. Yet, this shift has led to a concerning decline in the societal status of teachers.

Some argue that the rapid advancement of information technology, with a proliferation of tools and resources supporting learning, has diminished the central role of teachers, relegating them to a secondary position in schools. However, the reality of the educational process demonstrates that even in modern schools equipped with robust

technological support, the most decisive factor in the quality of education remains the teacher. A good teacher continues to be the most critical determinant of educational success in the modern school system.

Others suggest that in progressive pedagogical methods emphasizing student-centered learning, self-directed learning, and fostering students’ independence, the student, rather than the teacher, should be the focal point of the school. Yet, this perspective is not entirely accurate. The most effective and efficient way of learning—saving time and effort—is still through a skilled teacher. A good teacher helps students avoid unnecessary detours and eliminates the need to search aimlessly through vast amounts of knowledge. The mission of schools and teachers is to awaken the potential within each student through education, nurturing and developing their internal capacities. This mission is both noble and essential. Teachers must not only teach students how to learn but also guide them toward self-learning—reading books, researching, discovering new ideas. At the university level, students should actively research and create new knowledge, leveraging their internal resources to develop their intellect, critical thinking, and character, rather than passively absorbing knowledge, no matter how advanced it may be.

Recently, there have also been opinions suggesting that it is not teachers but the curriculum that plays the most decisive role in determining the quality of higher education. If that were the case, improving the quality of higher education would be overly simplistic, requiring only improvements to the curriculum or importing programs from renowned international institutions. Unfortunately, without excellent teachers, it is impossible to design and implement an effective curriculum.

### **2.4 Dynamic teaching methods**

Xunzi placed significant emphasis on shaping human behavior and standards of interaction within society. Notable among his approaches is the method of “self-cultivation” (*tu thân*) aimed at achieving “family regulation, state governance, and universal peace” (*tề gia, trị quốc, bình thiên hạ*). Another method, “nurturing the mind and character” (*tôn tâm dưỡng tính, dưỡng khí*), seeks to cultivate and develop the innate goodness within people. He also proposed the method of “following the sages” (*pháp tiên vương*), which set the moral principles, virtues, and ethical standards of wise figures as unalterable benchmarks. These benchmarks cannot be adjusted to suit the lower capabilities of learners but demand dedication, perseverance, humility, and a forward-thinking attitude from both teachers and learners.

The philosophies of ancient Chinese thinkers highlight a deep concern for education and self-education. They emphasized that those who teach must first cultivate themselves, maintaining moral integrity as an example for their students. Today, under the negative influences of the market economy, the almighty power of money has disrupted traditional moral

and ethical values. Traditional virtues risk fading, replaced by bad habits and unethical behaviors that are increasingly prevalent in families, schools, and society. The 10th Party Congress warned: "Political and ideological degradation, along with moral and lifestyle corruption; bureaucracy, corruption, wastefulness, and harassment of the people among a significant portion of officials and Party members, persist seriously and for a long time, reducing public trust in the Party. This poses a threat to the survival of the Party and the regime" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2006, pp. 267–268). This serves as a wake-up call, urging individuals to "nurture the mind and character" to rediscover genuine values in life. Since human nature is fundamentally good, and everyone carries seeds of goodness, education can refine and perfect human character.

Modern education emphasizes the importance of self-discipline and self-learning throughout the learning process. Students are not limited to classroom instruction from teachers; they can also learn from peers, their social environment, and independent research at home. The widespread use of the Internet and information technology in modern education allows learners to independently access and explore knowledge to enrich their understanding. At the same time, teachers must facilitate and encourage active participation from students, adopting student-centered teaching methods. This includes reducing lecture time, increasing hands-on practice and interactive learning, and promoting self-study. Students should be encouraged to explore books, reference materials, seminars, discussions, presentations, essays, and projects depending on their age and educational level.

Limiting traditional teaching methods—where teachers lecture and students passively take notes—is essential as it stifles positive cognitive development. This shift is particularly important in Vietnam, where remnants of rote learning, examination-focused education, and scholasticism remain entrenched in society, even among intellectuals. Higher education, in particular, must prioritize developing scientific research skills, critical thinking, and innovative practices.

The 13th Party Congress emphasized the need to "implement comprehensive solutions to improve the quality of education and training, reform curricula, content, teaching methods, and examination and evaluation systems in a modern direction" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, p. 138).

Education must also assess learners accurately to tailor methods to their needs. Each individual has unique preferences, strengths, and weaknesses, contributing to the diversity and richness of modern society and providing fertile ground for creativity. Education should be open and unrestricted, fostering individuality rather than imposing a uniform approach to training or knowledge acquisition. Instead, it should offer multiple pathways and opportunities, allowing young people to develop their talents while enabling

them to change directions easily if their initial choices prove unsuitable.

Experiences from developed countries show that the more equitable and democratic an education system, the broader its reach, and the more likely it is to produce exceptional talent. At the same time, education must establish specific standards for learners to strive toward, enabling them to improve themselves and achieve those benchmarks.

## CONCLUSION

Xunzi's perspective on humanity in his socio-political philosophy was developed based on a philosophical worldview, views on human nature, principles from the *I Ching* (Book of Changes), and traditional culture and thought. He recognized that formulating sound political opinions must be rooted in social realities, with human nature serving as the foundation of those realities. Xunzi also believed that the most effective method of governance is to base policies and strategies on the inherent characteristics of society. However, influenced by his class standpoint, Xunzi offered unique interpretations when presenting his socio-political views.

The study of Xunzi's comprehensive socio-political philosophy on humanity has left an invaluable intellectual legacy for future generations. It also raises many relevant issues that need to be clarified in the context of new historical conditions. For the ongoing educational reform in Vietnam, Xunzi's perspectives on humanity in Chinese philosophy have significant implications in several areas: (1) the necessity of policies to identify, nurture, train, and utilize talent; (2) an emphasis on moral education, viewing it as the fundamental task in all educational processes; (3) the crucial role of teachers in the entire educational process; and (4) the development of diverse and dynamic teaching methods to achieve the highest educational effectiveness.

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