

A Comparison Between the Thought of Wei Yuan and Xunzi

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Abstract

The thought of Wei Yuan has a lot in common with that of Xunzi. First of all, Wei Yuan and Xunzi both care more about modern times instead of ancient times. Secondly, these two philosophers focus a lot on practical administration and value utility, which is considered to be utilitarian. Thirdly, Wei Yuan usually uses exegesis of *The Book of Odes* as a vehicle for political commentary just as Xunzi does. The similarity results from similar social background of the late Qing and Warring state periods; the revival of the Modern-text School which in 19th century served as the most important camp for the tradition of focusing on practical administration developed by Xunzi, as well as the popularity of study of Xunzi in the Qing Dynasty. However, with his mind deeply rooted in the cultural tradition of China, Wei Yuan failed to step further into modernity.

Key words: Wei Yuan; Xunzi; Thought; Modernity

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, the orthodox scholarship had been the Han School (*Hanxue* 汉学), which arose from the rebellion of Song School (*Songxue* 宋学, also known as Neo-Confucianism) and emphasized the specific meaning of the classics through the careful

analysis of text (*kaoju* 考据). After long-term prosperity, the Han School was in stagnation during the reigns of Jiaqing (1796-1820) and Daoguang (1821-1850). On one hand, loaded down with trivial details, the Han School narrowed its own research field and could not prevent reaching a dead end. Thus “the development of scholarship required a turn from the former track for its own sake.” (Chen & Liu, 2005, pp.138-139) On the other hand, the society had changed tremendously. Since the middle of the reign of Qianlong (1736-1795), the Qing Empire flowed placidly downstream. Domestic troubles and foreign invasion aroused national anxiety as well as weakened the rule of the Manchus, which in turn relieved the mind control of literati who had not dared to talk about politics earlier.

Under these circumstances, many scholars revived the ideological trend dating back during Ming-Qing transition of focusing on practical administration (*Jingshi zhiyong* 经世致用). They urged that in no way should literati immerse themselves in ancient literature and care nothing about reality. Rather, scholarship must be bound with politics and related to national welfare and people’s livelihood, be put into practice to solve actual problems, and “the eternal target of scholarship was to change the society and increase the benefit.” (Liang, 1985, p.85) In this way, these scholars were not only using Confucian classics as the tool of governing, but they were also paying attention to the thought of ancient philosophers besides Confucius and Mencius as supplements. Wei Yuan 魏源(1794-1857) was one of them.

As a member of scholars that emphasized the practical administration (*Jingshipai* 经世派), Wei Yuan argued, “maximizing the strength of Huang, Lao, Shen, Han and minimizing their shortcomings would turn out to be an excellent method of governing the country (兼黄、老、申、韩之所长而去其所短, 斯治国之庖丁乎).” (Wei, 1994, p.52) Moreover, in *Mogu* 默觚 (Treatise on Scholarship and Government), which earned a special

place in his collected works, I find his thought has a lot in common with Xunzi (third century BC) who was emblematic of a trend of thought in the Warring States period. That is quite interesting but few people have examined it carefully. Hence, I'd like to make a comparison between the thought of Wei Yuan and Xunzi, analyzing the reasons of their similarity and ultimately thinking about the relationship between cultural tradition and modernity.

1. THE SIMILARITY BETWEEN THE THOUGHT OF WEI YUAN AND XUNZI

First of all, Wei Yuan and Xunzi all emphasize the importance of modern times rather than ancient times and make the way for changes

Unlike Mencius who admired the reign of early kings, Xunzi held the idea of "following the model of late kings" (*Fa houwang*法后王). He believed, "the beginnings of heaven and earth are still present today, and the way of all true kings is in that of the later kings." (Xunzi, 1988, p.179) (天地始者, 今日是也; 百王之道, 后王是也) Consequently, he thought "to put them (the late kings) aside and to discuss instead extreme antiquity is like giving up your own lord and serving another,"¹ (舍后王而道上古, 譬之是犹舍己之君而事人之君也) and the one who did that was vulgar Ru (*suru*俗儒), not great Ru (*daru*大儒). This thought of valuing modern time freed people's minds from following the ancient ways and made it possible for social changes and reforms, which was what two of Xunzi's most famous students, Han Fei韩非 (third century BC) and Li Si李斯(third century BC) did.

Like Xunzi, Wei Yuan also fixed his eyes on modern times which resulted from his belief in the irreversibility of history. When other scholars still advocated reverting to old ways, Wei Yuan argued that "dating back to ancient time, the sky is different from today's sky, so is the earth, so are the people and things (三代以上, 天皆不同今日之天, 地皆不同今日之地, 人皆不同今日之人, 物皆不同今日之物),"² and nothing could be used without any changes until now since the world has been so different from before. Applying it to political life, he pointed out that "one who is good at governing people does not stick to one method forever (善治民者不泥法),"³ and "even the sages wouldn't follow the same set of institutions and rituals (五帝不袭礼, 三王不沿乐),"⁴ thus changes and reforms should take place according to time. Furthermore, Wei Yuan believed that "the greater the changes are, the more the people will be benefited (变古愈尽, 便民愈甚)," and through necessary changes and reforms the later

stage will always be better than the former. It is clear that compared with Xunzi, Wei Yuan showed more solicitude for political changes and reforms which was the general consensus among scholars in the second half of the 19th century, the age of decadence.

Secondly, Wei Yuan and Xunzi value practical administration and utility, showing the approval of "Hegemony Way"(*Badao*霸道) to some extent

In contrast with Mencius who cared about righteousness (*yi*义) and despised the pursuit of all kinds of benefit (*li*利), Xunzi attached considerable importance to the benefits of state such as political stability, population growth, and material wealth. He believed "the true king enriches the people (王者富民)"⁵ and regarded both the ruler and his subjects being rich (上下俱富) as the summit of a state. He also emphasized that Ru should bring actual goods to society through administration: "Were Ru to reside in this court, the government would become refined; Were they to occupy subordinate positions, popular customs would be refined." ⁶ (儒者在本朝则美政, 在下位则美俗) "What he achieves is genuinely great, and the benefits he brings are truly numerous."⁷ (其所得焉诚大, 其所利焉诚多) In his opinion, "If the methods of Ru are thoroughly carried out, the result will be riches that spread out and reach everywhere in the world,"⁸ (故儒术诚行, 则天下大而富, 使而功) which shows that the Ru is responsible for the wealth and power of the state rather than only the moral conduct.

Moreover, in several statements, Xunzi placed Hegemon (*ba*霸) who were military strongmen of lesser virtue at the second level, only inferior to the True King. For the ruler whose country was well ordered, accomplishments great, and regulation enhanced, Xunzi said he could become a true king if going up, or a hegemon if going down (上可以王, 下可以霸), which means in his opinion Hegemon is not the opposition of True King, but rather a substitute.

As for Wei Yuan, not only did he attach importance to practical administration, but he also proved the legitimacy of it by integrating the factors of Hegemony Way into Kingly Way (*Wangdao*王道). Wei Yuan believed "the practical techniques of government—whether in agriculture, taxation, defense, or law—were actually close to the hearts of the culture heroes," (Kuhn, 2002, p.48) who regarded a sufficiency of food and military power as tools for governing the empire. Hence, he didn't agree with the distinction that the Kingly Way was merely moral conduct while Hegemony Way exemplified practical governing skills, on which literati had relied for long. From his point of view, "there have been wealth and power that were exercised apart from the Kingly Way, but

¹ Xunzi, "Contra Physiognomy", Vol.1, 206.

² Wei Yuan, "The Fifth Chapter about Government", 54.

³ Ibid, 56.

⁴ Ibid, 56.

⁵ Ibid, 55.

⁶ Xunzi, "On the Regulations of a King", Vol.2, 98.

⁷ Xunzi, "The Teachings of the Ru", Vol.2, 70.

⁸ Xunzi, "On Enriching the State", Vol.2, 125-126.

never the Kingly Way exercised apart from wealth and power. The distinction between True King and Hegemon lies in their intentions, but not in their actions. Their intentions are characterized, respectively, by principles of public good and private good; but their actions are not greatly different (自古有不王道之富强, 无不富强之王道。王伯之分, 在其心不在其迹也。心有公私, 迹无胡越)。⁹ Therefore, the practical administration was shifted to a higher level as Kingly Way also pays attention to it: “The Kingly Way is finely textured and all-encompassing. Through it runs all the pure and subtle quiddity of existence, including farming and herding, corvée management, military and fiscal affairs (王道至纤至悉, 井牧、徭役、兵赋, 皆性命之精微流行其间)。”⁹ In this way, the pursuit of utility was considered to be a moral good as long as it was out of the the public consideration and aimed at increasing collective happiness, which somehow allows the existence of an authoritarian government whose rigor and ruthlessness are well-intentioned.

Thirdly, both Wei Yuan and Xunzi see *The Book of Odes* (*Shiji* 诗经) as a vehicle for political commentary

In the 32 chapters of *Xunzi*, *The Odes* was quoted 83 times. The majority of exegesis his used was adjusted from the original meaning to contain his own understanding. For instance, after stating that there was no relation of order and chaos to heaven, season and earth but only to people, Xunzi appended exegesis from a ode called *Tianzuo* 天作 (Heaven Created):

Heaven created the high mountain (天作大山),
And King Tai found it grand (大王荒之),
It was he who fell the trees (彼作之),
And King Wen made it secure (文王康之).¹⁰

This ode originally served as a song for worship, talking mainly about the grand achievements of the ancestors of the Zhou people. However, Xunzi accorded to it significance beyond the particular person or events to epitomize the general truths: it is the people instead of nature that are responsible for the government of a state. In fact, it had been quite common among the elites since the Spring and Autumn period to use *The Odes* as “a reference point for discussions of moral conduct and social practice, as well as a safe way to criticize the powerful by allusion,” (Kuhn, 2002, p.34) which is called “duanzhang quyizhuyi 断章取义” (quote out of context to suit one’s purposes), and Xunzi is absolutely one of the most typical activists of this tradition.

Wei Yuan also inherited this tradition thousands of years later, who quoted *The Odes* an amazing number of 183 times in *Mogu*. He believed that *The Odes* was not to be understood in the conventional “praise and blame”

(*meici* 美刺) mode of explication, but rather served as “writings of remonstrance” (*jianshu* 谏书) in which could be found guidance for the public life of the present age. This is reflected by his statement that “the odes and their music were composed in order to promulgate the sovereign’s virtue and to transmit the feelings of the people. By guiding grief and happiness, by producing loyalty and filial piety, they are the constant complement of public affairs (盖诗乐之作, 所以宣上德而达下情, 导其郁滞, 作其忠孝, 恒与政治相表里, 故播之乡党邦国, 感人心而天下和平)。” (Wei, 1976, pp.244-245) In one of his articles, he begins from the assertion that correct policies are to emerge through discussion, and then he says “that is why, in the ode ‘*Deer Call*’, the deer cry out to each other when foraging for food (是以《鹿鸣》得食而相呼)。”¹¹ Traditionally this ode is regarded to have shown the harmonious relationship between the ruler and his administrators, but in Wei Yuan’s treatment of the ode, what stands out is the communication among the “deer”: the elite must overcome the fear of intercommunication in public affairs. In this way, Wei Yuan also uses *The Odes* as a vehicle to express his own opinions about present politics.

2. REASONS FOR THE SIMILARITY OF WEI YUAN AND XUNZI

From the discussion above, it is not difficult to find that both Wei Yuan and Xunzi have a strong concern about politics, paying particular attention to practical administration and utility such as national wealth and military power. Confronted with the similarity of these two philosophers, it is necessary to find out the reasons that caused two persons living in different ages to think alike.

2.1 The Similarity of Their Social Background

The world of Xunzi was undergoing a rapid and radical transformation. Xunzi saw the end of the Zhou dynasty that had ruled for nearly 800 years. He observed the annihilation of the feudal states and the unification of the Chinese world by the invincible military power of the First Emperor of Qin. These events made impossible the optimistic and idealistic views advocated by Mencius and molded his philosophy based on the theory of bad nature of human (*Xing’e lun* 性恶论). Similarly, Wei Yuan also lived during a social transition period “when the changes are so severe that the past thousands of years have never witnessed (三千年未有之大变局)。” Facing not only the domestic troubles but also threats from outside since the Opium War, many scholars like Feng Youlan 冯友兰 (1895-1990) felt that history had repeated itself, and Yu Yue 俞樾 (1821-1907) said more clearly that “the world is

⁹ Ibid, 130.

¹⁰ Wei Yuan, “The First Chapter about Government”, 41.

¹¹ Ibid, 41-42.

undergoing another Warring States period(今天下一大战国也).” Harsh realities force Wei Yuan and Xunzi to focus on present problems and seek for ways to enhance military power as well as national wealth.

2.2 The Tradition of Focusing on Practical Administration and the Revival of the Modern-Text School (*Jinwen jingxue*今文经学) in Mid-Qing

There has been a long tradition of focusing on statecraft (*jingshi*经世) in Chinese scholarship, which is shared by Confucianism and other schools of thought and usually emphasized at the turning point of history. In Confucianism, this tradition after Confucius has been divided into two parts respectively lead by Mencius and Xunzi, the former called “inside sage” (*neisheng*内圣), and the latter “outside king” (*waiwang*外王). For Mencius, human nature is inherently good, thus governing a state is mainly by the ruler’s moral cultivation to “find the lost mind” (*qiu fangxin*求放心). If the ruler can expand the virtues in his mind to a larger scale, then he can keep the whole state safe and prosperous even without other actions. This way of focusing on moral cultivation was then inherited by Neo-Confucianism after the Song Dynasty. For Xunzi, human nature is bad and will inevitably lead to conflict and evil, thus the ruler needs to regulate people with Li礼(ceremonies, rituals or rules of social conduct) from outside to establish order, stabilize the society and make the state rich and powerful. In this way, he considers practical administration based on Li to be of more value than morality for the goods of the state. Xunzi’s way of focusing on practical administration, however, was not greatly valued after the Han dynasty until the Ming-Qing transition, when many scholars believed that the extreme emphasis on moral cultivation instead of practical governing skills had contributed to the collapse of Ming Dynasty. In the 19th century, there was the second revival of this tradition (as mentioned at the very beginning) together with the revival of the Modern-text School inside Confucianism.

The Modern-text School is an interpretive school dating back from the mid-second century. It has a tradition of textual commentary which attributed to the Confucian classics a prophetic intent to influence mankind’s future, through the cryptic expression of “great meanings in subtle language”(weiyanyan *微言大义*). Thus people inspired by the classics could express their feelings and opinions about present life according to their own understanding of the classics, which makes it possible for scholars to participate in current politics. The Modern-text School in Qing Dynasty revived and served as the most important camp for the tradition of focusing on practical administration when both the Song School and Han School cannot meet the current need of society for wealth and power. In this way, Wei Yuan together with other members from the Modern-text School such as Gong Zizhen龚自珍(1792-1841) and Kang Youwei 康

有为(1858-1927) who cared a lot about politics and came up with several strategies of governing are also the loyalist successors of the tradition of focusing on practical administration developed by Xunzi.

2.3 The Popularity of the Study of Xunzi in the Qing Dynasty

The study of Xunzi was not so popular as that of Mencius after Song until the Qing Dynasty, when many scholars found it valuable. Actually this owed a lot to the careful textual analysis by the Han School, as Yu Yingshi 余英时(1930-) has mentioned, “the research on text focused on Confucian classics at first with some involvement of history, then developed to the thought of ancient philosophers, which is a natural process. When it comes to the ancient philosophers, the first one the scholars had to deal with was Xunzi, who was considered to be the heresy of Confucianism for ages. Thus the thought of Xunzi was the first to be reevaluated and attached importance upon.” (Yu, 2006, pp. 288) In the Qing Dynasty, there were lots of research works on Xunzi including *Xunqingzi Tonglun*荀卿子通论(The General Introduction of Xunzi) by Wang Zhong汪中(1744-1794), and *Xunzi Jijie*荀子集解(The Collection of Interpretation of Xunzi) by Wang Xianqian王先谦(1842-1917). Although there were not works from Wei Yuan that have direct relations with Xunzi, it is likely that Xunzi influenced some of his thoughts somehow.

All in all, the similarity of Wei Yuan and Xunzi has a lot to do with the common cultural soil which different thoughts in history were rooted in and absorbed sustenance from. However, standing at the door of modernity, the challenges Wei Yuan had to face were more complicated than those of Xunzi which cannot simply be solved with the help of cultural tradition.

3. STANDING AT THE DOOR OF MODERNITY

Philip A. Kuhn once said “what the political philosopher and activist Liang Qichao was to the 20th century, Wei Yuan, mutatis mutandis, was to the 19th,” (Kuhn, 2002, p.27) which shows the position of Wei Yuan in the history of thought of modern China. There is no doubt that Wei Yuan stood on a higher level than his contemporaries to have a broader view that allows him to put forward several advanced ideas related to the “constitutional development of the modern state.” (p.27) However, in my opinion, these ideas didn’t break the traditional thinking pattern, which, on the other hand, restrained him from stepping further into modernity. The best illustration is his idea of focusing on practical administration.

For one thing, in order to prove the rationality of practical administration, he had to shift it to a morally high level with the framework of Kingly Way and Hegemonly Way, and finding evidence of practical administration

in the Kingly Way means he still advocated the mode of “kingly politics” that relies highly on the government of a sagely king to guarantee the prosperity of country.

For another, although some people believe Wei Yuan’s emphasis on utility could be seen as a form of utilitarianism (Tang, 1987, p.205), a school of thought arising in modern history, there is an essential difference between them. According to Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, the principle of utility has two aspects: one is the happiness or interest of individual which can be measured through the values of his pleasures and pains brought by an act, and the other is the happiness or interest of the community. From Bentham’s point of view, the interest of community is the simple sum of the interests of the several members who compose it, so “it is in vain to talk of the interest of the community without understanding what is the interest of individual.” (Bentham, 2005, p.12) Only when every member of the community maximizes his interest can the community achieve the maximization of its interest. In this way, individual interest acts as the foundation and has the foremost position. The emphasis on the individual in utilitarianism shows accordance with the spirit of western constitutional government in modern times: the individual right acts as the basis of politics, which is even superior to the country and constitution. (Wang, 2015, p.44)

However, the hierarchy of importance of the individual and the community is reversed in Wei Yuan’s statement. Wei Yuan valued utility like wealth and power, but as Philip A. Kuhn has pointed out, “by ‘wealth and power’, Wei means that of the state, not of individuals.” (Kuhn, 2002, p.49) Like Xunzi and other ancient philosophers, Wei Yuan pays more attention to the outcomes that are good for the state rather than individual interest, and he even affirmed “an authoritarianism that would not shrink from the conduct of the Hegemons—power holders so despised by moralistic Confucian historians but so good at keeping order.” (pp.51-52) Even though he has emphasized a greater scope for political participation by the established elites which is important for the constitutional development of the modern state, what he really cares about is the unity of elites and the ruler aiming at the benefits of the whole state rather than the individual rights of elites to express their political opinions.

Here we see the different focus in western countries and Chinese tradition on *ren* 人 (individuals) and *min* 民 (people). Unlike the former which stressed the conflict between individuals and country and asked for a limit to the power of state to protect individual freedom, the latter showed the antagonism between people and the ruler and had a demand for more chances for people to participate in the discussion of public affairs, which ultimately aims at unifying the state power and maximizing it. The power of the state should not be limited but rather expanded. Thus we can see that Wei Yuan, though the enlightening

thinker in the 19th century, did not step out of the thinking paradigm limited by cultural tradition like his predecessor Xunzi.

CONCLUSION

The thought of Wei Yuan has a lot in common with that of Xunzi. They both care more about modern times instead of ancient times. They both focus a lot on practical administration and value utility, which is considered to be utilitarian. They both use exegesis of *The Book of Odes* as a vehicle for political commentary. The similarity results from similar social background of the late Qing and Warring state periods. However, with his mind deeply rooted in the cultural tradition of China, Wei Yuan failed to step further into modernity, leaving this mission for his followers to complete in later decades.

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