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6 or a half-dozen: How Xunzi and Lord Shang want the same thing

Today's two-party divide in American politics doesn't compare to the numerous governmental philosophies vying for the spotlight in ancient China. American politics agree on a number of basic ideas, despite the ceaseless focus on the differences between the liberal and conservative parties. Such consistencies among the parties today include equality before the law, constant adherence to law, and meritocracy, all of which were included in Lord Shang's ideas from thousands of years ago. However, there are just as many (and probably more) ideas from Lord Shang that have not survived to affect our present-day political and social practices, such as his blind pursuit of agricultural production and military power, repulsion to music, opposition to learning, and lack of job diversification. This should come as no surprise, as numerous other philosophers of ancient China—some coming before Lord Shang and others after—disagreed with many of his fundamental policies as well. Xunzi, who preceded Lord Shang, had wildly different ideas on how a state ought to be governed. While Lord Shang advocated for almost everybody to become a farmer, even at the expense of most other occupations and achievements not related to agriculture, Xunzi believed the individual possesses huge potential to become cultivated in the many ways of the world and achieve great things through “deliberate effort” (Ivanhoe, p. 298). However, they share the end goal of producing a well-ordered and successful state. Xunzi accedes that “to have long-lasting achievements and to complete great accomplishments is the height of good order,” while Lord Shang phrases almost everything in terms of its effect on the government's well-being and longevity (Ivanhoe, p. 293). The similarities in their end goal paired with the discrepancies in the path to a

successful state draws attention to the origin of their differences, which ultimately comes down to how they each view the Individual and the People.

Lord Shang has a complete lack of faith in the population. According to him, “The way to administer a country well, is for the law for the officials to be clear; therefore one does not rely on intelligent and thoughtful men” (Shang, p. 94). He vehemently opposes having individuals in the population who are freethinking. He sees them as unpredictable.

The way to organize a country well is, even though the granaries are filled, not to be negligent in agriculture, and even though the country is large and its population numerous, to have no license of speech. (This being so), the people will be simple and have concentration; the people being simple and having concentration, then office and rank cannot be obtained by artfulness. If these cannot be obtained by artfulness, then wickedness will not originate. (Shang, p. 93)

As seen above, he even distrusts the idea of a vocal and intellectual population so much that he favors restrictions on speech. Perhaps the right to free speech was not a prominent idea in that time but this seems like a particularly harsh condition under which to place a population. It is justified in Lord Shang’s eyes because it furthers the production of agriculture and the preparation of the military.

Interestingly enough, Lord Shang also claims the following:

If there are a thousand people engaged in agriculture and war, and only one in the arts and crafts, then those thousand will all be remiss in agriculture and war; if there are a hundred people engaged in agriculture and war and only one in the arts and crafts, then those hundred will all be remiss in agriculture and war. (Shang, p. 94)

This claim is intended to further his argument that nobody in the population can be entrusted with knowledge or learning. According to Lord Shang, everybody in the state needs to be entirely focused upon increasing agriculture and strengthening the military, but if somebody is studying and learning then he will likely veer away from farming and military and then cause others to do the same.

Whether or not one believes learning will lead people away from military and farming, it is clear that Lord Shang has much faith in – or fear of – the ability of a knowledgeable person to lead others.

While such a belief lies contrary to Shang's other teachings, it fits in well with Xunzi's philosophy about how a state should be run.

Xunzi understands the value in a well-functioning state as much as Lord Shang does, but his understanding is based upon an entirely different set of ideas. First off, he believes that human nature is inherently bad—a perspective that seems not far from Lord Shang's. However, whereas Lord Shang simply wants to contain and restrict the population to forcibly prevent unwanted things from happening, Xunzi advocates changing a person's behavior so that instead of acting out his malevolent nature he pursues goodness. "So, it is necessary to await the transforming influence of teachers and models and the guidance of ritual and the standards of righteousness, and only then will [the people] come to yielding and deference, turn to culture and order, and end up under control" (*Xunzi*, 298). Xunzi advocates learning instead of keeping the people away from knowledge because he sees order and control as a byproduct of a cultivated population.

Order can come from teaching and self-cultivation, and while Lord Shang opposes such a method, the quote above (Shang, p. 94) clearly shows that he believes a teacher can have significant impact on other individuals. An example Xunzi gives of the effect that teaching and cultivation can have on individuals talks about two brothers who must divide up property among themselves.

Suppose there were brothers who had some property to divide, and that they followed the fondness for benefit and the desire for gain in their inborn dispositions

and nature. If they were to do so, then the brothers would conflict and contend with each other for it. However, let them be transformed by the proper form and good order of ritual and the standards of righteousness. If so, then they would even give it over to their countrymen. (Ivanhoe, p. 301)

Xunzi intends for this lesson to be read not as a shallow story but as an indicator that order can be achieved among the individuals of the state through cultivation. This concept of order among individuals, if taken as seriously as Xunzi advocates, becomes the driving force behind the formation of an orderly state.

Xunzi's faith in cultivation as a method that can change the people and state to be orderly rests in an even stronger faith that the people are capable of being cultivated and taught. Lord Shang differs from this faith in every way. To begin, he does not think that cultivation is a worthwhile pursuit. Its effect would not be beneficial.

If, in a country, there are the following ten things: odes and history, rites and music, virtue and the cultivation thereof, benevolence and integrity, sophistry and intelligence, then the ruler has no one whom he can employ for defense and warfare. If a country is governed by means of these ten things, it will be dismembered as soon as an enemy approaches, and even if no enemy approaches, it will be poor. (Shang, 95)

On top of that, however, Lord Shang does not believe that most people are smart enough to discuss laws, learning and cultivation. "With a man who is controlled by laws," Lord Shang says, referring to the common man, "it is not worth while to discuss reform" (Shang, p. 87). This lowly view of other humans likely influences and precedes Lord Shang's other policies, as his confidence in predicting peoples' behaviors seems rooted in the idea that humans are not intelligent. He makes claim after claim that "If conditions A, B, and C are met then surely the people will perform X and Y," and

seems to see himself as an outlier human being who is one of few capable of thinking analytically and being creative.

Xunzi believes the opposite, that the common man is entirely worthy to discuss reform. In a broader terminology this means the common man is worthy to learn and gain knowledge.

Anyone on the streets could become a Yu. How do I mean this? I say: That by which Yu was Yu was that he was benevolent, righteous, lawful, and correct. Thus, benevolence, righteousness, lawfulness, and correctness have patterns that can be known and can be practiced... it is clear that the material for understanding these things and the equipment for practicing them is present in the people on the streets.

(Ivanhoe, p. 304)

Perhaps Lord Shang was not taken by such an explanation because it does not appear true on the surface. Even if Xunzi does not go so far as to agree with Lord Shang's perception of human intelligence, he surely must have interacted with somebody before who he does not think is worthwhile to teach. Xunzi addresses this with his own form of the "you can take a horse to water but you can't make it drink" metaphor. "The petty man could become a gentleman, but is not willing to become a gentleman. The gentleman could become a petty man, but is not willing to become a petty man. It has never been that the petty man and the gentleman are incapable of becoming each other. However, the reason they do not become each other is that while they could do so, they cannot be made to do so" (Ivanhoe, p. 305). Xunzi's philosophy is therefore based upon accepting that any person can become cultivated, and that in striving to teach everyone the state will become more ordered and successful. In addition, the more cultivated individuals there are, the more likely it is that those individuals who "cannot be made to [cultivate themselves]" will meet a teacher capable of changing them.

The policy decision that highlights the differences in Xunzi and Lord Shang's philosophies most effectively may be their opinions on government officials. Lord Shang believes that laws should be equal for everybody, whether elite or a common person (Shang, p. 132). A meritocracy should then be established such that the only way anybody will rise in rank is through military merit (Shang, p. 131). If this system is established, then the government officials themselves will not matter and the system of laws that selected those officials will successfully select new officials once their term is complete. Xunzi responds to an idea such as this by saying,

There are men who create order; there are no rules creating order of themselves...

Rules cannot stand alone, and categories cannot implement themselves. If one has the right person, then [the rules] will be preserved. If one loses the right person, then they will be lost... With the gentleman present, even if the rules are sketchy, they are enough to be comprehensive. Without the gentleman, even if the rules are complete, one will fail to apply them in the right order and will be unable to respond to changes in affairs, and thus [the rules] can serve to create chaos. (Ivanhoe, p. 269)

Xunzi sees no reason to have rules without competent officials and rulers. His emphasis on self-cultivation and teaching is meant to ensure that there will always be enlightened officials capable of navigating the rules and responding to changes in affairs.

Xunzi and Lord Shang appear at first as though their philosophies are entirely foreign to the other. While they do both value an efficient and orderly state, one takes the road of giving individuals almost no choice in their lives while the other allows the people a vast amount of freedom. This difference in policy mirrors Xunzi and Lord Shang's beliefs concerning how people use knowledge and cultivation, and those beliefs are the root of these two philosophers' differences. Lord Shang does not trust the people with knowledge and so desires for laws to make all decisions. Xunzi believes that the state is nothing without knowledgeable individuals capable of interpreting

the world and ensuring the laws are being effective. All other conflict between them branches in some way from this disagreement on the issue of the individual. If either were to take the other's perspective on this front, their policies would almost certainly share a stunning resemblance.

Works Cited

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