
**Xúnzǐ on Ritual**

Rituals, or more precisely, ritualized activities and associated duties, stand at the heart of Xúnzǐ’s ethical and political vision, as for him they are the key to bringing order, harmony, and beauty to human events and conduct. In Xúnzǐ’s view, people and society must inevitably follow some dào—some way, norm, or pattern—in their activity. Natural conditions alone—whether Heaven or nature in the abstract (tiān 天), the non-human natural world (tiān di 天地), or people’s spontaneous, untutored nature (xìng 性)—do not directly provide us with a dào. As Xúnzǐ says, “Dào is not the dào of Heaven, nor is it the dào of the earth; it is that by which humans dào [guide action].” People must create a human dào, which we follow not as a matter of the spontaneous functioning of our nature (xìng), but through “work” (shì 事) and “artifice” (wèi 为), or action that goes beyond our innate, untutored dispositions. Although the dào is not given by nature, however, it is not independent of nature, either. We fare better or worse depending on how well our dào “aligns” (cān 参) with natural conditions. Humans can achieve an orderly, flourishing society only if our dào aligns with nature, and the sage-kings or sovereigns—the cultural heroes—who introduced such a dào are themselves regarded as standing in alignment with heaven and earth.

Xúnzǐ holds that of the various dào we might follow, the course of history has established one particular path as the highest standard of rén 仁, or ethical goodness. This is the dào of the “former kings” (8/28/153)—the ancient sage-kings, specifically the founders of the Zhōu 周 dynasty. The core of this dào is an elaborate code of “rituals and duties” (lǐ
yi 禮義) governing nearly all aspects of personal and political life. Xúnzǐ calls this code “the ultimate human dào” (19/92/15–16).

These traditional rituals and duties are comprehensive in scope. They encompass formal ceremonies marking major life events, political occasions, and sacred affairs—examples include weddings and funerals, a ruler’s ascension to the throne, and ancestral sacrifices or sacrifices to spirits. But they also include routine, everyday norms of etiquette or propriety governing personal comportment and interactions with others, and they stipulate a network of social roles and associated duties and privileges. I will use “ritual propriety” as an umbrella term to refer to this overall complex of traditional ceremonies, protocol, etiquette, social roles, and ethical norms. To understand Xúnzǐ’s ethical and political thought, we should bear in mind that his conception of ritual propriety fuses what in principle we might distinguish as several distinct categories of norm-governed activity: state ceremonies, sacred or religious rituals, rites of passage, and everyday norms of etiquette and personal comportment.

Moreover, in early Chinese thought, yi 禮, the word I have been interpreting as referring to the duties associated with norms of ritual propriety, also has the connotation of “right” or “moral.” Xúnzǐ sometimes refers to yi 禮 independently of ritual propriety (lǐ) and sometimes pairs it with rēn (moral goodness) instead of ritual propriety. But passages that expound his ethical theory typically integrate yi 禮 with lǐ and refer to the pair as a compound, lǐ-yì, or “rituals-and-duties.” The implication is that for Xúnzǐ the normative sphere corresponding loosely to what we would call morality merges with those of personal excellence, etiquette, sacred rites, social protocol, and civic ceremony, all falling under a broad conception of norm-governed, formally regulated performances that together constitute the ideal human dào. For Xúnzǐ, human dào just is, in effect, a system of ritual propriety.

Xúnzǐ identifies several purposes this system fulfills, all of which extend from the central end of achieving good order in human conduct and affairs. For Xúnzǐ, “ritual
propriety and duties are the origin of order” (9/39/2). “Order”—zhì 治, a word that also connotes control, management, and governance—is the paramount value in his ethics and politics. Aside from obvious elements such as the absence of disturbance or violence, his conception of order comprises ethical, aesthetic, and political components. Order requires that individuals cultivate and conduct themselves according to ethical and civil norms, which Xúnzǐ sometimes characterizes as “beautiful” (měi 美), and that society maintain a smoothly functioning hierarchical political structure, led by a hereditary sovereign and administered by appointed officials. Order contrasts with chaos or disorder (luàn 亂), which Xúnzǐ associates with conduct arising directly from people’s innate, untutored nature. Nature in itself has no inherent tendency toward order, while uncultivated human nature tends toward disorder. So to achieve order, a scheme of ethical-cultural patterns must be imposed onto natural conditions. Ritual propriety is just such a system; it provides a coherent, comprehensive network of roles and norms that, if generally followed throughout a community, purportedly bring about personal and social order.

By instituting good order, ritual propriety simultaneously fulfills a second fundamental purpose: providing for people’s desires and needs. “Provision” is a key consequence in Xúnzǐ’s account of the origins of ritual propriety.

From what did ritual propriety arise? I say: People are born with desires. Desiring something but not obtaining it, they cannot fail to seek it. Seeking things without measures or limits, they cannot fail to come into conflict. Conflict leads to disorder and disorder to poverty. The former kings hated such disorder, so they instituted ritual propriety and duties to divide them, so as to provide for people’s desires and give them what they seek. They ensured that desires would not exhaust goods and goods would not be inadequate for desires. The two support each other and develop together. This is how ritual propriety arose. So ritual propriety is a means of provision. (19/90/3–5)

By distinguishing various hierarchical social roles, corresponding responsibilities, and associated rewards and privileges, the system of ritual propriety and duties imposes “measures and limits” on people’s attempts to satisfy their desires and distributes goods in a
coherent, organized way. Those of high rank receive more and finer goods, those of low rank less and coarser, but all receive enough to survive without conflict. Hence if members of a society generally observe the norms of ritual propriety, everyone’s needs will be provided for to a greater extent than otherwise. Moreover, because it provides a coherent system of roles to perform and norms to follow, ritual propriety is a means of achieving social coordination, cooperation, and unity. It establishes “the ranks of noble or common, the grades of elder and youth,” and “the divisions between wise and ignorant, competent and incompetent.” This hierarchical system ensures that people are proficient in their tasks and each obtain appropriate rewards, since the different ranks and responsibilities are the basis for differences in emolument (4/17/1–2). Establishing such a hierarchy of roles, tasks, and remuneration, Xúnzǐ declares, is “the dào of dwelling in a community and harmonizing as one” (ibid.).

Several passages in Xúnzǐ tie ritual propriety to the aim of rectifying things or setting them right (zhèng 正). Politically, ritual propriety provides clear, reliable standards for “rectifying the state” (zhèng guó 正國), analogous to how the scale, line, compass, and setsquare provide clear, reliable standards for evaluating whether things are heavy, straight, round, or square. If it is promulgated effectively, no one can mislead others as to what is right (zhèng). It provides “a dào for the practice of power”; kings and dukes who follow it can win the empire, while those who fail to follow it will see their city altars fall (15/72/9–10). Personally, ritual propriety is the means for “rectifying oneself” (zhèng shēn 正身) (2/8/1) and thus the major focus of learning for the gentleman (1/3/10). Indeed, ritual propriety provides norms by which to guide all thought and action: one passage mentions guiding oneself by ritual propriety in “all employment of the blood and breath, intention, and thought,” “diet, clothing, dwelling, and activity,” and “countenance, bearing, movements, and stride” (2/5/12–14). As part of its role in managing our disorderly nature, ritual propriety also provides orderly, elegant cultural forms (wén 文) by which emotions such as love and
respect can be expressed. Emotions and other attitudes provide the substance of ritual propriety; beautiful ritual forms are their outward manifestation. Ritual propriety regulates how happiness or sorrow are expressed in one’s countenance, voice, diet, dress, and dwelling (19/94/14–19). Without sacrificial rituals for the deceased, survivors would be frustrated by their inability to express their loss (19/97/21–22). Without proper ritual music to express their joy, people would inevitably fall into disorder (20/98/14–19). Summing up the roles of ritual propriety, Xúnzǐ says, “Without ritual propriety people cannot live, without ritual propriety tasks cannot be completed, without ritual propriety the state is not at peace” (2/15/5).

Ritual propriety fulfills these purposes, according to Xúnzǐ, by establishing a system of what he calls “distinctions” (biàn) or “divisions” (fēn). He holds that the characteristic feature of human life, which sets us apart from non-human animals, is not cognition, which we share with animals, but our capacity for social organization based on what he calls a “morality of divisions” (yì 分義) (9/39/9–13). It may sound paradoxical to claim that people can organize themselves effectively into unified communities precisely because of a scheme of divisions between them. But Xúnzǐ’s point is that social distinctions are the basis for the delegation of responsibilities, division of labor, and allocation of rewards. He claims that among the various systems of distinctions humanity might devise, “divisions” are the greatest; among “divisions,” ritual propriety is the greatest, and among potential systems of ritual propriety, that of the sage-kings is the greatest (5/18/17–18). As he uses it, the word rendered here as “divisions,” fēn 分, may refer to different roles, parts, statuses, responsibilities, privileges, and rewards. So when he asserts, as we saw above, that the sage-kings instituted ritual propriety “to divide them,” he is claiming that ritual propriety assigns people various roles, statuses, duties, and so on. These include the political and familial roles of ruler and subject, father and son, elder and younger brother, husband and wife; economic roles such as teacher, student, farmer, official, artisan, and merchant; and
statuses such as noble or lowly, elder or younger, worthy or foolish, competent or incompetent, poor or wealthy. Affairs such as mourning, sacrifices, court proceedings, military affairs, rewards and punishments, and distribution of goods are all to be based on such roles and duties.¹⁴

Although Xúnzǐ gives only a few examples of the concrete content of ritual propriety, these are sufficient to show that it sets out detailed, specific guidelines for the conduct and treatment of those in various roles on various occasions. We have already seen how it supposed to regulate one’s diet, clothing, dwelling, activity, countenance, bearing, movements, stride, intentions, and even thoughts. Another passage indicates that it also covers such things as the specific furnishings in the emperor’s carriage—the type of cushions, wood, carvings, bells, pennants, and insignia, for instance (19/90/11–14). It specifies detailed procedures for sacrificial feasts, weddings, funerals, and other events, including such particulars as the types of offerings, the placement of vessels, the order in which offerings are served, the style of music, and even the specific number and type of musical instruments (19/91/7–19/92/1). Ritual propriety prescribes the sorts of ornamentation and music used to acknowledge peace and good fortune, as well as the garments and weeping that acknowledge bad fortune (19/94/9–10). It stipulates precise funerary details such as the size of the tomb, the number and type of coffins, the dressing of the corpse, and the type of grave goods, and it specifies the minutiae of mourning rituals, such as that the survivors must move out of their home into a small hut, wear sackcloth mourning robes, walk with a cane, eat only thin gruel, and sleep on a mat of twigs, with an earthen pillow (19/93/11–19/94/6). Xúnzǐ’s examples indicate that the content of ritual propriety is utterly comprehensive yet highly concrete. Rituals cover all aspects of life, including both daily routine and weighty events, and they regulate minute details such as facial expressions, tone of voice, comportment, clothing, and diet.
This level of detail illustrates the distinctive character of Confucian ethics and the psychological processes by which ritual propriety guides action. Xūnzī’s ethics is formulated not through abstract general principles such as “Promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number,” nor general rules such as “Don’t lie” or “Thou shalt not kill,” but through guidelines conceptualized as concrete, repeated procedures of ritual etiquette, such as “Remove your hat and bow deeply before ascending the stairs to the hall.” This relatively concrete orientation reflects a conception of moral agency as lying in a commitment to and competent performance of repeated, skill-like patterns of activity, rather than in more abstract processes of reasoning or feeling. The actions of an ethically ideal agent spring not from a capacity for practical reasoning (as in Kant), nor from sentiment (as in Hume and Mill), but from a complex of concrete, repeated habits and skills, whose execution is managed by the heart (xīn 心). Action is conceived of as performance of a dào, akin to performing a symphony, dance, or drama. The elements of this dào are ritualized patterns of activity, intelligently and skillfully performed in response to various particular circumstances. These circumstances are understood to be “constant” (cháng 常, see 17/81/1), in the sense that they typically fall under certain regularly recurring general kinds of situations. Of course, similar circumstances display some variation, and anomalous events happen occasionally. But precisely because they are unlikely to recur, such variations and anomalies do not provide a guide to conduct. The proper dào for Xūnzī is one grounded in regularities in natural and social circumstances—hence his insistence that the dào is not subject to change over time, the social divisions it institutes being of “the same pattern as heaven and earth.” Accordingly, he conceives of the dào as comprising a system of repeated, ritualized patterns of proper conduct. For the agent committed to Xūnzī’s vision of dào, nearly all action will be to some degree ritualized, and moral character development amounts to acquiring virtuosity in
performing the ritual dào through study and practice, grounded largely in model emulation, much as one acquires competence in music, dance, or sport.

Xúnzǐ has three interrelated justifications for this elaborate system of ritual propriety. His central justification is the consequentialist claim mentioned earlier: the system is supposedly the most effective way of “patterning” or “organizing” (lǐ 理) the natural world—including human beings, in their innate, uncultured state—so as to achieve social order (zhì), and, as a result, provide for people’s material welfare. The system is effective, he claims, because it is uniquely successful in “aligning” (cān 参) with natural conditions (9/39/3, 17/80/2–3). So a second justification he could offer is that the dào of ritual propriety aligns with constant or regular natural patterns better than any alternative dào. A third justification has a teleological flavor. Xúnzǐ claims that the cultural and ethical norms manifested in such a system of ritual propriety are what make us fully human; our capacity to live by such norms is what distinguishes us from lower creatures and enables us to dominate them (9/39/9–16, 5/18/13–17). To live according to ritual propriety is to fulfill our human capacities.

These claims are deeply insightful on an abstract level. If we read Xúnzǐ as a theorist of ritual, making general, descriptive claims about the role or functions of ritualized activity in human societies, he is surely correct to claim that humans create their own cultural dào by imposing an organizing pattern onto natural conditions, and that such a dào is feasible only if it meets some minimum standard of alignment with nature. He may also be correct that a system for social coordination and cooperation can be justified only if it helps to secure people’s basic material welfare. This consequentialist criterion need not be a sufficient condition for justifying a social dào, but it is at least plausible to suggest it is a necessary one. Particularly interesting, and again highly credible, is Xúnzǐ’s claim that ritual propriety is distinctive of human life. It does seem that, as Xúnzǐ insists, human societies inevitably
establish some scheme of social divisions, along with a code of ritual performances that institute and express them. Weddings, graduations, coronations, and funerals are examples of such performances found across a wide range of cultures.

A descriptive construal of several of Xúnzǐ’s other claims about ritual propriety is equally insightful and plausible. Ritual propriety may indeed guide much of our conduct; much of our daily activity probably proceeds according ritualized or ritual-like patterns. Ritual propriety does provide outward form and ornamentation for our attitudes and social statuses and channels the expression of emotion. In some circumstances, at least, it mediates interpersonal relations and facilitates pursuit of tasks.

But of course Xúnzǐ is not engaged primarily in descriptive theorizing. He is propounding the normative stance that a certain dào—the tradition of ritual propriety stemming from the Zhōu sage-kings—is justified above all others because it fulfills the various functions of ritual he identifies in an especially effective way. The problem is that even if we affirm the value of these functions, the considerations he offers probably justify no particular code of ritual propriety. Even if we allow that his favored code secures order, provides for material welfare, aligns with natural conditions, and enables a distinctively human form of life, numerous alternative systems—most notably, a system with less rigid, complex, and costly ritual practices, or one less authoritarian and hierarchical, more liberal and egalitarian—might do so as well or better. Despite the challenge of contemporaneous philosophical opponents such as the Mohists, Xúnzǐ never addresses this point satisfactorily. Nor, for that matter, do the considerations he advances necessarily justify an especially central or fundamental role for ritual propriety as a means of social organization—particularly a code of ritual propriety as extensive and elaborate as his. Perhaps the functions of ritual he identifies could be fulfilled without actively promulgating
or enforcing any specific regimen of ritual propriety, simply by allowing people to find their own ways of interacting with each other.

Given the absence of a compelling justification for it, why is Xúnzǐ so deeply devoted to the Zhōu tradition of ritual propriety? One factor may be that he personally identifies so profoundly with this cultural tradition that he cannot seriously imagine living by alternative norms. He may also hold the skeptical conservative view that, whatever the merits or demerits of the prevailing social system, we have little reason to believe any alternative system could do better. But a more penetrating explanation may be that Xúnzǐ’s devotion to the Zhōu tradition stems from an even deeper attachment to—verging on an obsession with—his ideal of “order” (zhì). Indeed, he seems almost to equate the two: conduct that diverges from traditional ritual propriety is, for that very reason, disorderly.

Social order was a common concern among Warring States thinkers; it ranks among the Mohists’ core values, for instance. But Xúnzǐ’s emphasis on it goes beyond even the Mohists’. For them it is one basic good among several, and its components are simpler—primarily the absence of crime, conflict, and injury, the virtuous performance of core social roles, and the habit of reciprocally benefiting each other. To understand Xúnzǐ’s devotion to his elaborate, ritualized conception of order, I suggest, we must extrapolate beyond the explicit statements in the text. My hypothesis is that for Xúnzǐ the order achieved through ritualization provides a profound sense of confidence, security, and satisfaction—a comforting sense of belonging or being at home in the world—because it embeds natural events and human affairs within a comprehensible, authoritative normative structure—authoritative insofar as he insists its inventors were brilliant cultural heroes who designed it to correlate uniquely well with nature. By virtue of our place in this traditional dào, our lives take on significance, authority, and beauty. The more elaborate and
comprehensive the degree of ritualization, the greater is the agent’s sense that even routine daily activities belong to a familiar, coherent, controlled normative order.

This metaphorical function of ritual propriety for Xúnzǐ is illustrated by his discussion of the ritual response to death, arguably the most “disorderly” of all natural events. Xúnzǐ devotes much of his lengthy “Discourse on Ritual Propriety” to funeral and mourning rituals, which he says manifest the ethical significance of death and life (19/95/16–17). The key to proper ritual handling of death and mourning, he emphasizes, is to maintain “unity” between the deceased’s life and death, thus bringing the human dào to a fitting completion (19/93/6–7). To achieve this unity, the deceased must be treated with the “ornamentation” or “adornment” appropriate for expressing reverence commensurate with their station in life. Specifically, they must be treated in a way analogous to how we treated them while alive.

In funeral rituals, we adorn the dead on the basis of the living. We send them off to their death by symbolizing their life. So we serve the dead as if they were alive, serve the absent as if they were present, and the end and beginning are unified. (19/95/6–7)

By insisting on continuity in our treatment of the deceased, Xúnzǐ preserves their status within the ritualized web of human interaction even though their own participation has been irreversibly broken off. He thus reaffirms the continuity of the normative cultural order even in the face of a distressing, disruptive natural event. His account of death rituals is paradigmatic of how he sees ritual propriety as “patterning” nature and thus placing even uncanny, uncontrollable natural events within a regimented, stable cultural framework. Rather than acknowledging even in the slightest that death fractures the human cultural order—that the deceased in effect exit that order to be reclaimed by nature—he waxes lyrical about the unity and wholeness achieved through ritual propriety: “We serve the dead as we serve the living, serve the absent as we serve those present, give shape to the formless, and thus complete the proper cultural forms” (19/98/9–10).
Is the Xunzian ideal of comprehensive social order achievable or desirable? Is it needed to facilitate social cooperation and coordination and to fulfill the other purposes Xùnzǐ identifies? I propose to take an indirect route to answering these questions, by approaching them through a discussion of language, another area of human interaction that Xùnzǐ seeks to regulate.

Xùnzǐ on Language

Xùnzǐ famously contends that a sovereign should regulate language by fixing (dìng 度) the use of “names” (míng 名), or words, to distinguish different kinds of things, so that the dào is carried out, the ruler’s intentions are communicated, and he can lead the people to unity (22/108/4). This contention issues from the widely shared assumption in early Chinese thought that a crucial function of language is to guide action, through giving and following instructions and by properly distinguishing and naming various social roles and associated responsibilities.19 Xùnzǐ holds that the purpose of having names is to mark off different referents so as to clarify social ranks and distinguish similar from different kinds of things, such that intentions can be conveyed clearly and tasks accomplished effectively (22/108/12–14). By enforcing regulations fixing the referents of names, the ruler seeks to ensure that all members of society follow the same conventions for distinguishing the titles, holders, and responsibilities of various social roles, identify the same objects by the same names, understand instructions the same way, and thus can carry out practical tasks according to their superiors’ expectations. Names play a role in expressing intentions and distinguishing objects comparable to that of tallies, weights, and measures; disordering the right use of names by splitting up phrases, arbitrarily creating names, or making strange pronouncements is thus a serious crime comparable to tampering with tallies, weights, or measures (22/108/5). If the use of names is not regulated and relations between names and things become disordered, then the proper interpretation of commands and laws will become contentious,
and arguments and lawsuits will be common (ibid.). Even law-abiding officials or devout Confucians will fall into disorder (22/108/8–9). “Rectifying names” (zhèng míng 正名) is thus a crucial step toward ensuring political order.

Numerous links and parallels hold between Xúnzǐ’s treatment of language and his account of ritual propriety. The use of names is based on a scheme of distinctions between similar and different kinds (lèi 類) that is intertwined with ritual propriety. The norms of ritual propriety are the basis for many of these distinctions, and the framework of kinds is among the “roots” of ritual propriety (1/3/10, 19/90/20). The traditional norms of ritual propriety determine the correct use of the names implicated in them (22/107/21). Conversely, to conform to the norms of ritual propriety, people must be able to use names correctly. They must properly distinguish the various ranks, roles, and duties named in the ritual code. Before they can follow a ritual rule about bowing to elders, they must be able to distinguish which actions are referred to by the word “bowing” and which people by the word “elders.”

Using names properly by making appropriate statements (yán 言) in a manner conforming to the practices of the “former kings” is itself part of ritual propriety, to which the gentleman must attend conscientiously (5/19/10–11). How one uses language to make statements is an aspect of the ritualized form (wén 文) that organizes and expresses things (5/19/14). Both ritual propriety and names are compared to measurement tools that provide reliable, objective standards—for conduct, in the case of ritual propriety (11/51/19–21), and for communication, in the case of names (22/108/5). Xúnzǐ treats both ritual propriety and rectifying names as pivotal aspects of governance: both are described as means of unifying the populace, carrying out the dào, and achieving sociopolitical order. More concretely, as keys to cooperation and coordination, both are said to be means of accomplishing practical affairs (2/15/5, 22/108/12–13).
Fundamentally, for Xúnzǐ both language and ritual propriety are fields in which sociopolitical leaders institute or regulate cultural forms for organizing nature, thus creating a normatively structured medium within which human activity proceeds. A necessary condition for either medium to function effectively is that it accord with features of nature: ritual propriety must align with natural patterns, and naming is grounded fundamentally in how human sense organs interact with the natural environment to distinguish similar from different kinds of things (22/108/14–22/109/3). But in both cases the normative medium is a cultural creation or invention, not something given by nature. Language for Xúnzǐ is part of the normative cultural dào, overlapping and at least partly subsumed by ritual propriety. Hence, to maintain sociopolitical order, rulers must rectify (zhèng 正) the use of names just as they employ ritual propriety to rectify themselves (2/8/1) and their state (11/51/19). Indeed, in the overall context of Xúnzǐ’s thought, the doctrine of rectifying names can be regarded as a step toward ritualizing language—and thus imposing order on it—just as Xúnzǐ seeks to ritualize other aspects of human activity.

Xúnzǐ’s contention is that just as human social flourishing requires social order, which rests on strict observance of ritual propriety, effective linguistic communication requires linguistic order, which rests on rigorous public observance of conventions governing the reference of words. In effect, he claims that people will be unable to convey instructions or jointly distinguish different kinds of things unless the sovereign intervenes to ensure that the referents of words are rigidly fixed. Does linguistic communication indeed require rigid conventions of reference, akin to ritualized norms of action, as Xúnzǐ seems to suggest? Would rectifying names be feasible or desirable, as he contends? And by extension, is the strict regulation of activity entailed by a Xunzian code of ritual propriety needed to achieve an orderly, flourishing society? Passages in the Daoist anthology Zhuāngzǐ imply that the answer is No on all counts.
Notes

1. Xūnzǐ uses several different words to refer to different aspects of nature. Tiān 天 typically refers to Heaven or nature in the abstract, as the sum of all natural conditions and patterns. Tiān dì 天地 ("heaven and earth") refers to the non-human natural world. Xìng 性 refers to spontaneous, innate, and thus natural dispositions. Thus it is sometimes interpreted as "nature," as in the phrase "people’s nature." Xūnzǐ’s stance here contrasts with that of some Daoist texts, which imply that Nature itself provides a dào for us to follow. It also contrasts with the Mohist view of Heaven or nature (tiān) as a quasi-personal deity that follows a dào of benefiting everyone, which in turn serves as a model for human dào.


3. See, for example, Xūnzǐ 19/95/3, which states that the world comes to order as a result of the merging of xìng and wèi. See too 23/113/17–19, which explains that, like everything people become capable of through study or develop through work, ritual propriety and duty are wèi (artifice). They contrast with xìng, which is bestowed by Nature and requires no learning or work.


5. Or, on an alternative reading of the line, this dào is the highest standard of humanity (rén 人).

6. See, for example, 19/95/1–3, which implies that the combination of nature and artifice produces both social order and beauty in individual character, or 19/94/8, which speaks of the beauty of carrying out one’s duties. See too 1/3/17 and 1/4/16, which posit beauty as an end of study and cultivation.
A Xunzian theorist of ritual would thus agree with Rappaport’s suggestion that ritual form itself adds something to the substance of ritual beyond whatever content the symbolically encoded form itself expresses (1999, 31). (For related views, see Bell 1997 and Seligman et al. 2008.) For Xúnzǐ, the regular performance of ritualized activities according to the norms of ritual propriety partly constitutes social order and thus brings into existence a particular ideal of a flourishing society. The role of ritual propriety as a basis for social order means that the significance of any one ritual act extends beyond its specific content, lying partly in its relation to the overall system of ritual propriety and duties. Through the ritualized form of their activities, ritual performers may understand themselves to be contributing to the continuity of the human dào, creating and sustaining the cultural patterns that make us human. Moreover, as we will see below from Xúnzǐ’s explanation of funeral rites, because of its role in the overall system, a single concrete ritual performance may have multidimensional significance. For instance, the act of offering sacrificial wine to the deceased may simultaneously express grief, display respect, acknowledge the deceased’s social status, situate death within the overall process of human life, affirm the unity of the deceased’s life, and reinforce the integrity of the cultural order.

See too 9/36/3, which in similar language states that “regulating ritual propriety and duty in order to divide them [people], making there be the ranks of poor and wealthy, noble and common” is “the basis for providing for all the world.”

9 See also 10/42/12–21. Xúnzǐ’s claims here may overlap Durkheim’s (1912) view that the performance of rituals reaffirms and builds commitment to the social structure or Collins’s (1988) suggestion that rituals create psychological solidarity crucial to the functioning of society. A Xunzian theorist might agree that social solidarity is one of several functions or consequences of the general observance of ritual propriety. But Xúnzǐ’s focus is primarily on conduct and action guidance, not attitudes: if the norms of ritual propriety are generally
observed, all members of society will behave in a coordinated way, according to shared norms.

10 11/51/19–20. On the analogy to artisans’ tools, see too 19/92/12–19.

11 Xúnzǐ is here employing the same analogies—artisans’ measurement tools—that the Mohists had previously used to explain how “the benefit of all” provides a distinct, reliable model (fǎ 法) for what is morally right (yì 義) or the correct dào. Xúnzǐ contends that it is actually ritual propriety that provides such a model.

12 Xúnzǐ underscores the social, traditional, and performative nature of ritual propriety by explaining that teachers are in turn the means of rectifying ritual propriety (2/8/1). One cannot attain competence in the rituals on one’s own. They must be practiced in interaction with others under the critical eye of a master.

13 See, for instance, 19/94/8–12 and 19/98/1–2. Xúnzǐ’s explanation of how ritual propriety provides an orderly means for expression of potentially disruptive emotions resonates with Van Gennep’s (1960) work on rites of passage, which proposes that such rites channel emotions into an organized cultural framework, thus subjecting them to social control. It overlaps Radcliffe-Brown’s (1965, 160) interpretation of rites as regulated symbolic expressions of sentiments, with the difference that Xúnzǐ does not see the expression of emotion as the crux of the significance of ritual propriety. The significance lies rather in how ritual propriety produces order; one of the ways it does so is by providing a disciplined means of expressing potentially disruptive emotions. Moreover, Xúnzǐ would reject Radcliffe-Brown’s suggestion (ibid.) that sentiments determine individuals’ conduct and thus are the key to maintaining social order. For Xúnzǐ, the key factor producing social order is habitual performance according to ritual propriety, regardless of the performers’ sentiments. Ideally, performers will come to love ritual propriety. But order can still be maintained when
performers are subject to disruptive or contrary sentiments, provided they continue to
approve of and thus remain committed to ritual propriety.

14 See, for instance, 4/17/1–2, 9/39/5–7, and 19/90/10.

15 Fundamentally, the heart directs action through its normative attitudes of approval (*kě* 禮) or disapproval (22/111/11). An agent may learn to perform the dào reflexively, its norms having become part of the agent’s character. But such performance rests ultimately on the attitude of “approving” the dào itself. See 21/103/21 and 22/111/22–23.

16 9/39/5. See too 5/19/4, where he vehemently dismisses the suggestion that the dào for achieving order might vary in different eras or circumstances.

17 In his recent “constructivist” interpretation of Xûnžî, Hagen contends that Xûnžî’s worldview “allows for the possibility of pluralism” and does not assume the existence of a “singular ultimate or transcendentally fixed Way” (2007, 10). As characterizations of Xûnžî’s theoretical framework, these claims seem clearly correct. Despite these points, however, Xûnžî espouses a traditionalist conservatism with dogmatic tendencies, as Hagen acknowledges when he remarks that although Xûnžî provides a rationale for traditional ritual practices, “[his] justifications [fall] short of showing that only those precise norms would do the job” (2007, 112).

18 In this respect, Xûnžî’s stance converges with Hertz’s (1907) and Durkheim’s (1912) proposal that death rites function to reaffirm the permanence of the social order after it is ruptured by a member’s demise.

19 I have elsewhere described this Chinese assumption as the “job title” theory of language (Fraser 2009a). “Names,” such as “knight,” “teacher,” “parent,” or “minister,” are regarded as associated with norms of conduct, much as job titles are associated with job descriptions. To be denoted by a particular name is to be subject to certain norms and expectations; conversely, only those who live up to the norms deserve the name. Part of the work of
rectifying names is to clarify which jobs are indeed associated with which names and whether particular individuals live up to their name—their job title—or not.

Hansen emphasizes that practical rectification of names is needed to interpret and perform ritual propriety correctly. Before a code of conduct can guide us, we need to be able to distinguish the objects and actions named in the code (1992, 65–66).

I owe this formulation to my colleague Dan Robins.