

# The Generative Logic and Internal Connection of Xunzi's Thought on Rule by Rites and Rule by Music: Rooted in the Theory of Evil Human Nature

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## **Abstract:**

Rule by rites and rule by music constitute essential components of Xunzi's thought. Against the backdrop of collapsing rites and disordered social norms in the late Warring States period, their generative logic, functional orientation, and internal connection hold profound theoretical value and practical significance, necessitating systematic exploration. While existing scholarship has long focused on Xunzi's rule by rites and music, few studies directly examine their generation and synergistic operation within the framework of evil human nature. This paper argues that both fundamentally stem from Xunzi's theory of evil human nature. Through the complementary functions of music unites what is common, rites distinguish what is different, they collectively guide human conduct, maintain social order, and achieve great governance. Rooted in the theory of evil human nature, this paper analyzes why these two governance modes emerged and elucidates their intrinsic connection, specifically discussing their complementary relationship. This aims to deepen understanding of Xunzi's theory of human nature and political philosophy, providing a new entry point for interpreting his thought on rule by rites and music.

**Keywords:** Xunzi; Evil human nature; Rule by rites; Rule by music; Thought on rites and music.

## **1. Introduction**

As a synthesizer of Confucianism, Xunzi, deeply aware of the social realities of the late Warring States period, significantly challenged Mencius's framework of good human nature with his theory of evil

human nature. In his view, human nature is inherently evil, thus requiring postnatal guidance and governance-termed transforming inborn nature and initiating conscious exertion. The specific means involve combining the rigidity of rites and laws with the flexibility of music, achieving thorough and stable

governance through this balance of firmness and gentleness. Among these, rites constitute the fundamental principle and formative basis of law. As *Encouraging Learning* clearly states: Rites are the great basis of law and the guiding principle of categories. Law provides mandatory safeguards for rites without deviating from their value [1]. Therefore, to grasp the essence of Xunzi's thought on social governance and human education, analysis should focus on both rule by rites and rule by music to avoid bias. Understanding their functions requires first tracing their origins, specifically discussing what concerns of Xunzi's thought rites and music respectively address, and what ultimate effect their combined governance achieves. While the emergence of Xunzi's rule by rites and music has multiple causes-such as his own Confucian intellectual tradition and the social reality of collapsing rites forcing solutions-the most fundamental cause remains his theory of evil human nature.

Regarding this thesis, existing research has formed a multifaceted dialogue: Mou Zongsan, in *The School of Names and Xunzi*, uses Confucian mind-nature theory as a criterion to critique Xunzi's theory of evil human nature as belonging to the category of qi-nature theory. He argues that Xunzi's ritual system, constructed relying on the intellectual mind, emphasizes only the ordering function of external norms. Lacking an internal moral foundation, it reduces ritual principles to mere external coercion [2]. Benjamin Schwartz, in *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, approaches from a comparative perspective, emphasizing Xunzi's practical concern with ritual and music. He argues that its core lies in resolving social conflicts arising from evil human nature through the institutional divisions of rites and the emotional integration of music, highlighting the practical value of rites and music as tools for constructing social order [3]. Synthesizing these views, scholars either focus on philosophical controversies surrounding the theory of evil human nature and rule by rites or examine the social governance functions of rites and music. Overall, research still leans towards rule by rites, leaving room for further exploration regarding the generative logic of rule by music, the deep complementary mechanism of rites' distinguishing differences and music's unifying commonality, and their synergistic operation within the framework of evil human nature. This paper expands its discussion precisely based on this research possibility.

## 2. Logical Overview from Nature to Governance

The construction of institutions inevitably involves con-

siderations of human nature. The understanding of human nature largely determines the construction of the underlying logic of various institutions, as has always been the case. Similarly, the theory of evil human nature directly determines Xunzi's proposal and application of rule by rites and rule by music. However, why can evil-this definition of human nature-lead to socialized targeted governance measures? Why can human nature be governed? Clarifying these reasons is essential for ensuring the logical coherence of subsequent arguments.

Human nature is evil; what is good in it is the result of conscious exertion (*Encouraging Learning*). This sentence most directly reflects Xunzi's thought on evil human nature and serves as a foundation of his political philosophy [1]. Therefore, we must first inquire: what is the specific meaning of this evil? It is readily apparent that whenever Xunzi mentions or describes evil human nature, he refers to human desires or human emotions. For instance, immediately following what is good in it is the result of conscious exertion is: Now, the nature of man is such that he is born with a love of profit. Following this nature will cause aggression and greed to grow while yielding and deference to disappear. Man is born with envy and hatred. Indulging these feelings causes violence and crime to develop while loyalty and trustworthiness to perish. Man is born with the desires of the ears and eyes, which are fond of sounds and beauty. Indulging these desires causes licentiousness and chaos to arise, while ritual principles, cultural form, and the natural order of reason to perish. Thus, to give rein to man's original nature and yield to his emotions will inevitably result in aggression and greed, will combine with violation of social class distinctions and disruption of the natural order, and will end in violence [1]. Another example: Man is born with desires. If these desires are not satisfied, he cannot but seek their satisfaction. If these seeking lacks measure or boundaries, conflict inevitably arises. Conflict leads to chaos, chaos leads to poverty (*Discourse on Ritual Principles*) [1]. This directly connects the evil of nature with various human desires.

However, these human desires are not inherently desires to commit evil deeds or act unjustly; they are desires for personal enjoyment, such as loving wealth or indulging in sensory pleasures. It must be acknowledged that Xunzi believed nature contains the sprouts of evil, inclinations towards evil. Yet if these desires are satisfied under conditions of sufficient resources and without harming others, then evil cannot arise. Or, if there were only a single natural individual, his following his nature, indulging his emotions, and acting arbitrarily (*Encouraging Learning*) would not cause disorder or chaos and thus could not be judged as evil, nor would it necessitate the premise of transforming evil into good [1]. Therefore, human desires

are not equivalent to human evil nature, but human desires lead to human evil nature. Of course, satisfying these desires in real society inevitably leads to contention and chaos. This also demonstrates that Xunzi's evil is not the original evil of nature itself but is result-oriented and conditioned by sociality. Order and disorder refer to the state of human society. Judgments about good and evil are only necessary under the premise of group living, i.e., communal existence. Therefore, Xunzi's evil possesses social characteristics, which is also his fundamental distinction from Mencius's innate morality when discussing good and evil [4].

Furthermore, the evil of human nature can be governed by humans themselves. According to the Guodian Chu bamboo slips unearthed in the late 20th century, the character 伪 (Wei, conscious exertion) in what is good in it is the result of conscious exertion was written as an ancient variant character composed of 为 (Wei, to do) above and 心 (Xin, heart/mind) below (see Figure 1, now obsolete). Research confirms its meaning should be the action of the heart rather than general behavior; it refers to the heart's activities of thinking and the actions they initiate, possessing clear value connotations and demands [5]. Therefore, the root of goodness still originates from the heart (here, the heart and nature are clearly distinguished). Thus, humans possess this active, acting good heart. Moreover, the sage accumulates thought and reflection and practices conscious exertion, enabling him to awaken and master conscious exertion ahead of the masses to lead and educate them. This is the basis for humans being able to transform their nature and for human nature to be guided towards an ordered state.



**Fig. 1** The character “伪” composed of “为” above “心”

Therefore, the governance Xunzi advocated aims to confine human nature within a framework beneficial to the overall development of society. It does not seek to correct problems inherent in human nature itself but only to constrain and adjust the socialized results of human nature. Consequently, he chose corresponding governance methods based on the characteristics and capacities of human nature and the human heart. Thus, his intervention in human nature is not purely to suppress human desires but to establish institutions and implement education, allowing desires to be satisfied within the limits of order. Based on

this, Xunzi considered rule by rites and rule by music the most effective means. It can be observed that both governance measures target the results that human nature, once disciplined, produces for the overall social order. Both are also ways to fully utilize the goodness of the human heart. This is the fundamental reason Xunzi needed rule by rites and rule by music.

### 3. How Evil Nature Gives Rise to Rule by Rites

Having outlined the general logic from evil nature to governance, we now examine specifically how evil nature gives rise to rule by rites.

Xunzi advocated the theory of evil human nature precisely because, in his view, goodness is artificial, not natural; it thus requires the method of ritual principles to change the evil of human nature [6]. Nature is the uncarved block; conscious exertion is the patterning and flourishing. Without nature, conscious exertion would have nothing to act upon; without conscious exertion, nature cannot beautify itself (*Discourse on Ritual Principles*) [1]. This statement shows that rites are an inevitable requirement arising from the characteristics of human nature itself, and the characteristics of human nature provide the condition for the application of rites; the two are inseparable. As previously discussed, the evil of human nature manifests in human desires. Regarding various human desires, the ancient kings hated such disorder; therefore, they established ritual principles and moral duty to set boundaries, to nurture men's desires, and to supply men's demands. They saw to it that desires did not exhaust material goods and material goods did not become insufficient for desires. Thus, the two were sustained and kept in balance. This is the origin of ritual principles. Therefore, ritual principles are to nurture (*Discourse on Ritual Principles*) [1]. Nurturing men's desires, meaning appropriately satisfying human desires and demands, is the primary task of rites. Xunzi acknowledged the inevitability of human desires, hence he advocated satisfying the reasonable parts of desires to reduce people's obsession with excessive desires. However, this satisfaction must be implemented within an institutional framework. This can be divided into two aspects: using ritual institutions to channel desires and using rites to demand moral practice. This is a necessary extension of the logic of evil human nature.

Regarding channeling desires, the role of rites is mainly manifested in using institutions to make clear social divisions and enable group living. For the young to refuse to serve their elders, the lowly to refuse to serve the noble, and the unworthy to refuse to serve the worthy—these are

three portents of disaster for man (*Contra Physiognomy*) [1]. This is the result of people following their desires. Therefore, the gentleman, having obtained its nourishment, also delights in its distinctions. What are meant by distinctions? I say that distinctions refer to the gradations of noble and base, the differences between old and young, and the distinctions between the poor and rich, the important and unimportant, all being treated appropriately (*Discourse on Ritual Principles*) [1]. Rites clarify the specific norms of division through institutions and rituals, determining hierarchical orders like noble and base, elder and younger, and establishing the boundaries of rights and obligations for different social roles. This avoids the phenomena caused by evil nature-conflict leads to chaos and violation of social class distinctions and disruption of the natural order, ending in violence. For instance, gradations of noble and base ensure the stability of social resource distribution; differences between old and young avoid intergenerational conflicts through ethical relationships. Furthermore, How is man able to form communities? I say it is due to social divisions (*On the Regulations of a King*) [1]. Once all types of hierarchical orders are well-maintained, the foundation for group cooperation and harmonious coexistence is laid by rites, enabling the orderly organization of social groups.

Regarding moral practice, the role of rites is mainly manifested in translating the norms of institutions and rituals into human practice. Such practice does not follow human nature but conforms to moral requirements. This corrects the direction of human development and is ultimately beneficial for individual life. Who understands that sacrificing one's life to uphold integrity is the means by which life is nourished! ... Therefore, if a man unifies himself with ritual principles and moral duty, then both will be obtained. If he unifies himself with his inborn nature and emotions, then both will be lost (*Discourse on Ritual Principles*) [1]. This passage explains that sacrificing one's life for the ruler earns the salary that nourishes one's life; spending money appropriately achieves a balance between income and expenditure, supply and demand, avoiding waste due to idle personal wealth or contention caused by insufficient circulating money. Human nature is to fear death and love wealth. If everyone acted according to their natural instincts, social order would collapse. Only by constraining behavior with rites, compelling people to perform actions contrary to their nature-like sacrificing life for integrity or spending money-can one truly achieve the results desired by human nature (e.g., preserving life, accumulating wealth). Simultaneously, such actions happen to conform to the requirements of social morality.

Regarding this passage, Wang Xianqian annotated: Without ritual principles, cultural form, and natural order, one

indulges one's nature and emotions, not knowing where to turn [1]. Rites provide a direction for human behavior; direction means conforming to the requirements of moral practice, thereby perfecting the self. Furthermore, cultivating moral practice benefits the harmony of family and social ethical order. For example, in sacrificial rites, one must follow ritual regulations: The rites of mourning are to ornament the dead with the appearance of the living, greatly imitating their life in order to send off their death. Thus, we serve the dead as though they were living, and the departed as though present. The end and beginning are unified. At the beginning of death, they wash the hair and body, place rice in the mouth, imitating the conduct of life... (*Discourse on Ritual Principles*) [1]. One cannot act according to personal wishes, otherwise, it leads to either excessive grief disrupting normal life or disrespecting ancestors by failing in one's duties (*Discourse on Ritual Principles*: If it were up to the stupid, vulgar, and depraved man, he would forget the dead by the morning after they died in the evening. If such conduct were indulged, then he would be no better than birds and beasts. How could such men live together in community without disorder! If it were up to the gentleman who cultivates himself, then the three-year mourning period is completed in twenty-five months. It passes like a steed galloping past a crack, yet if he persists in it, it would be endless. Therefore, the ancient kings and sages settled on establishing a middle course and setting regulations, so that when enough had been done to complete the cultural pattern and natural order, they stopped) [1]. Similarly, in dining, Xunzi prescribed the deferential yielding process, transforming the physiological need for food into social-ethical practice: After three deferential gestures, they reach the steps; after three yieldings, the guest ascends. They bow to the utmost, exchange toasts, and the rituals of yielding are complex. As for the many guests, they ascend to receive [the toast], sit to make offerings, stand to drink, and descend without toasting in return... The host toasts the guest, the guest toasts the assistant, the assistant toasts the many guests; the young and old are ordered by age, ending with those who wash the hands. Therefore, only when everything conforms to ritual regulations can the ethical order of family and society be maintained in a stable and good state.

In summary, how could ritual principles be anything but perfect! They establish the exalted as the ultimate model, and none in the world can add to or subtract from it (*Discourse on Ritual Principles*) [1]. Rites are both the highest standard for human conduct and, conversely, cultivate human moral wisdom. Thus, substantiality is the accumulation of ritual principles; greatness is the breadth of ritual principles; loftiness is the exaltation of ritual principles;

intelligence is the completeness of ritual principles (*Discourse on Ritual Principles*) [1] expresses this principle. The nurturing and dividing/distinguishing of rites aim to demarcate individual interests, ultimately pointing towards granting and safeguarding each person's due share [7]. This reveals that the essence of rule by rites is an institutional response to evil human nature: without the realistic premise of evil human nature, the channeling and educational functions of rites would lose their necessity; conversely, the practice of rites proves that only by acknowledging the evil of human nature can the governance goal of living together in community and unity (*On Honor and Disgrace*) be achieved through institutions and education [1].

#### 4. How Evil Nature Gives Rise to Rule by Music

Xunzi's thought on rule by music also directly targets the corrective function for human nature under the theory of evil human nature. However, unlike rites, music is not entirely a postnatal creation; it is an expression of inner human emotions, a phenomenon directly produced by nature. Precisely for this reason, guiding the development of music, making it conform to norms, plays an extremely important role in educating human nature and harmonizing human emotions.

Music is joy—an unavoidable aspect of human emotion. Thus, man cannot be without music. When happy, it must be expressed in sound and manifested in movement. The Way of Man—the changes in sounds, movements, and the essence of his nature—are completely expressed in music. Therefore, man cannot be without joy, and joy cannot be without expression. If expression is not guided by the Way, disorder inevitably arises. The ancient kings hated such disorder, so they established the sounds of the Ya and Song to guide it. They ensured the sounds were sufficient to induce joy without becoming licentious, the patterns sufficient to be distinct without inducing obsessive thought, and the variations in melody, complexity, simplicity, restraint, richness, rhythm, and tempo sufficient to move men's good hearts and prevent depraved and corrupting qi from finding an opening (*Discourse on Music*) [1]. Here, Xunzi elaborates on the inevitability of music's existence and the reason ancient kings needed rule by music. This parallels the justification for rule by rites: the ancient kings hated such disorder. Ancient kings needed to create the sounds of the Ya and Song, rejecting vulgar, decadent music. This served two purposes: first, to move men's good hearts; second, to achieve overall emotional identification from the family to the state.

As previously discussed, Xunzi's evil possesses distinct social characteristics. Correspondingly, the good heart in *Discourse on Music* should also refer to thoughts or emotions beneficial to society. To benefit society, the expression of human desires must be constrained. For rule by music, this means utilizing music's harmonizing and moderating function. Music is the guiding principle of harmony and moderation. When music is performed in the ancestral temple, ruler and ministers, superiors and inferiors, listening to it together, none fail to become harmonious and reverent. Within the household gate, father and son, elder and younger brother, listening to it together, none fail to become harmonious and affectionate (*Discourse on Music*) [1]. This harmony requires not indulging natural emotions but channeling and transforming evil emotions. Humans are born with the nature of loving profit and hating harm. If left unchecked, it provokes conflict. Music, through the cultivation of rhythm and melody, enables emotions to issue forth and all hit the proper mean, transforming primitive impulses into emotional expressions conforming to the overall interests of society, such as harmonious reverence and harmonious affection. Therefore, the first function of rule by music is to directly influence people's thoughts at the emotional level, making emotional expression conform to norms and preventing wanton behavior.

Furthermore, rule by music can achieve social unity, harmony, and stability. Once the good heart of each individual is fully mobilized by music, it naturally influences folk customs and, consequently, the entire state (*Discourse on Music*: Music is what the sage-kings delighted in, and it can make good the hearts of the people. It stirs men deeply, it transforms their customs and alters their customs) [1]. On the surface level of the opposition between good and evil, when music is seductive and dangerous, the people become dissipated, mean, and base. Dissipation leads to disorder; meanness and baseness lead to conflict. Disorder and conflict cause the military to weaken, the city walls to be breached, and enemy states to endanger them. When it is like this, the Hundred Clans will not be secure in their dwellings, will not delight in their villages, and will not be satisfied with their superiors. Therefore, when ritual principles and music are abandoned and depraved sounds arise, it is the root of danger, diminishment, disgrace, and humiliation. Thus, the ancient kings esteemed ritual principles and music and despised depraved sounds... [because] Music is what the sage-kings delighted in, and it can make good the hearts of the people. It stirs men deeply, it transforms their customs and alters their customs. Therefore, the ancient kings guided them with ritual principles and music, and the people became harmonious and cooperative (*Discourse on Music*) [1]. If music were

dominated by the inherent desires of human nature, the foundation of the state would be shaken. Only by placing rites and music in the dominant position can the state be secure, demonstrating the importance of music for national security.

On the other hand, from the fundamental logic of the theory of evil human nature, because human nature is inherently evil, individuals easily become antagonistic due to selfish desires. Music, through its characteristic of examining the One to determine harmony-unifying the emotional tone to achieve harmony-can enable people of different classes and individuals to dissolve antagonism in shared emotional experiences. Therefore, music is the great unifier of the world (*Discourse on Music*) [1]. As Wang Bo stated, only when order and the mind-heart combine will it be internalized as human essence, becoming a truly human order. Accordingly, a life in accordance with order signifies the self-completion of man [8]. The ultimate goal of rule by music is to transform evil human nature into good social identification through emotional education, making people willing members of society who voluntarily follow an order conforming to human nature.

In summary, rule by music subtly influences human emotions, promotes the good heart, thereby achieving the realization of individual value within society, maintaining the overall cohesion of the group, and ensuring social harmony and national stability. Therefore, the essence of rule by music is the emotional guidance of evil human nature.

## 5. The Functional Complementarity of Rule by Rites and Rule by Music within the Framework of Evil Human Nature

Having separately discussed how Xunzi's thoughts on rule by rites and rule by music arose from the theory of evil human nature, we now examine their combined function within this framework to understand Xunzi's overall ideal political philosophy.

First, rites are the fundamental principle that music must follow. Rule by music sometimes functions as part of rule by rites, assisting in the implementation of rites. Ritual principles are the highest expression of the Way of Man (*Discourse on Ritual Principles*) [1]. All human actions in the world should follow rites, and the application of music is no exception. If music deviates from the principle of rites, it becomes dissipated, meaning excessively indulgent. The music Xunzi described as seductive and dangerous also lies outside the scope of rites. Furthermore, rule by music can be an organic component of rule by rites, making the implementation of rites deeper and

more structured. Ritual principles cut short what is long and extend what is short, diminish what is excessive and augment what is insufficient... When they established music as tranquil and joyful, it did not lead to dissipation, indolence, or disrespect (*Discourse on Ritual Principles*) [1]. Here, music specifically refers to sound and music, capable of making people serene and joyful without becoming dissolute or lazy. Its function of harmonizing the human heart takes rites as its boundary of restraint. The musicians enter and sing three pieces, then the host presents them with wine. The sheng players enter and play three pieces, then the host presents them with wine. There is antiphonal singing for three pieces, and combined music for three pieces. The musicians announce the music is complete and then depart (*Discourse on Music*) [1]. In the context of banquets, music is used to control the rhythm of ritual proceedings and serves as a vehicle for expressing ritual requirements. Specific music like ascending songs, sheng songs, antiphonal songs, and combined music are procedural components manifesting ritual requirements, subordinate to the demands of rites. The completeness of rites and music leading to harmony and joy is precisely the flourishing realm of the kingly way that Xunzi envisioned [9]. Therefore, at this level, rites play a decisive role over music; rule by music is a specific requirement and an important part of rule by rites.

Nonetheless, the role of rule by music for rule by rites is irreplaceable. Music concretely embodies the requirements of rites at the emotional level, strengthening identification with rule by rites and internalizing its demands into conscious action. When music is performed in the ancestral temple, ruler and ministers, superiors and inferiors, listening to it together, none fail to become harmonious and reverent. Within the household gate, father and son, elder and younger brother, listening to it together, none fail to become harmonious and affectionate. Among the village elders and clan heads, young and old listening to it together, none fail to become harmonious and obedient (*Discourse on Music*) [1]. This means music carries the rational core of rites in an emotional form, transforming the requirements of rule by rites into spontaneous conscious action. Moreover, musical sounds enter deeply into men, and transform them rapidly (*Discourse on Music*) [1]. Precisely because music can evoke profound emotional resonance, its direct impact often surpasses that of rites. This resembles Plato's point in *The Republic* that poetry influences the masses with rich emotions, prompting listeners to emulate the actions of poetic figures, while philosophy educates through reason, its reach and effect far less than poetry. When proper sounds move men, compliant qi responds. When compliant qi takes form, order is generated... Thus, when music is put into practice, the

will becomes pure. When ritual principles are cultivated, conduct is perfected. Ears and eyes become acute, blood and qi become harmonious and balanced. Customs and habits are altered, the world is made tranquil, and beauty and goodness delight each other. Therefore, it is said: Music is joy (*Discourse on Music*) [1]. Music brings joy to the people. Since most people are dominated by emotional thinking and lack rational reflection, rule by rites cannot achieve its intended effect without the process of rule by music.

Combining the above discussion, the most crucial point in the relationship between rule by rites and rule by music is that the rigid requirements of rule by rites and the flexible education of rule by music form a relationship of firmness-flexibility complementarity in social governance. They complement each other, jointly promoting the maximization of governance effectiveness. Because rites are external norms with coerciveness, often contrary to human desires, and although they also serve to nurture desires, their fundamental purpose is to regulate human development. Moreover, since human nature is evil, naturally possessing many desires unwilling to be disciplined, rites alone are likely to encounter resistance. This necessitates music to subtly cultivate and nurture inner dispositions [10], allowing rites to smoothly permeate all aspects of society. Rites and music—one firm, one gentle; one external, one internal—jointly serve the goal of correcting human nature and maintaining social harmony. They construct an ideal social state while also considering the feasibility of practical operation. Furthermore, rule by rites and rule by music have their own primary purposes: Moreover, music is the unchangeable means of harmony; rites are the unalterable means of natural order. Music unites what is common; rites distinguish what is different. The guiding principles of rites and music control the human heart (*Discourse on Music*) [1]. Uniting what is common and distinguishing what is different seem contradictory but precisely embody the complementarity of rule by music and rule by rites.

Music enables the people to generate shared feelings, becoming united and harmonious. Rites maintain hierarchical distinctions, ensuring orderly interaction amidst this commonality. From this perspective, the commonality created by music is the fundamental condition for realizing the differences distinguished by rites, providing the emotional foundation and social cohesion for differences, preventing them from transforming into actual conflicts. Conversely, differences are the primary way commonality is maintained long-term and operates organically, preventing commonality from descending into chaos due to undifferentiated merging and lack of boundaries. This is precisely the necessary requirement for the successful guidance of

human evil nature. The distinguishing differences norm of rites suppresses conflict in the explicit realm of human desires, while the uniting commonality education of music eliminates estrangement in the implicit realm of human emotions. Together, as fundamental means of transforming inborn nature and initiating conscious exertion, they make people consciously place their behavior under the constraint of moral order, maintain long-term social stability, and fundamentally respond to the governance problem posed by the theory of evil human nature.

## 6. Conclusion

All institutions are built upon a fundamental grasp of human nature. For Xunzi, the evil of human nature determined that the corresponding mode of social governance could not be like Mencius's or Laozi's—simply following the development of human nature. Instead, it should discipline human development into a framework conforming to the overall interests of society while minimizing human resistance. Therefore, he selectively inherited Confucius's thought on rites and music, adapting it to the social realities of the late Warring States period. Based on the theory of evil human nature, he expanded rites from the dimension of morality and ethics to the dimension of political institutions, transforming the practical goal of rites from the world returning to benevolence to making clear social divisions and enabling group living, maintaining social order. This provided a rigid standard requirement for correcting human nature.

Simultaneously, he elevated the function of music from cultivating individual character and perfecting personal morality (arising in Poetry, standing firm in Rites, perfected in Music—to nurturing the character of all members of the group and fostering shared feelings. Evil human nature, if unguided, inevitably leads to competition for social resources and conflicts of individual emotions. Xunzi provided solutions for these two problems through rule by rites and rule by music respectively, and strengthened governance efficacy through their combined implementation, constructing a political order system possessing both idealism and practicality. However, although this system was highly feasible at the theoretical level, when paired with the political needs of the late Warring States period—characterized by expediency, enriching the state, and strengthening the military—it still failed to be realized due to its relatively gradualist nature and the disappearance of the social foundation for implementing rites and music. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Xunzi's system of rule by rites and music still greatly enlightens contemporary thought. Modern social governance also needs to balance institutional norms and humanistic education, achieving

the unity of order and harmony through a combination of firmness and gentleness. Future research could focus on exploring the implications of Xunzi's thought on rites and music for modern social governance or on reflecting upon and critiquing the effectiveness of Xunzi's model of governance through rites and music, thereby deepening and comprehensively understanding Xunzi's relevant thought within the existing research chain.

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