

Attitudes towards Tradition in Ancient China Part I: The Case of Classical Confucianism



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores writings of key Ancient Chinese thinkers till the end of Warring States Period (221 BC) in a historical order to bring out the conflict between traditionalist and modernist tendencies of those times. The focal point of this exploration is the way(s) an idealized past is responded to by major schools of thought in ancient China. Here, we chart out, analyze and interpret various Ancient Chinese points of view regarding the relative evaluation of the old and new values, ideas and techniques. In this first part, starting with an investigation and interpretation of vocabulary involved, we deal with few Pre-Confucian classics, Confucius himself and two of his great followers, Meng Zi and Xun Zi. The paper concludes that in spite of a predominantly conservative temperament, the Confucian texts and thinkers in question present a highly nuanced view of and open-ended way of applying the tradition. A pattern is discovered in their treatment of tradition-following and some principles are inferred from the writings of Xunzi, the most philosophical of all three thinkers we discuss.

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Introduction

Most writings appearing in the wake of Shmuel Eisenstadt's *Multiple Modernities* project remain limited to the anachronistic and spatial level, looking at the contemporary *interpretations* and adaptations of a fundamentally European phenomenon.¹ A few writers,

¹ See, S. N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus*, 129, no.1(2000): 1-29.

however, have also endeavored to study this idea along diachronic and temporal lines by employing the term *Ancient Modernity*. Fabian D. Zuk, at the end of his chapter “Ancient Modernities and Social Decline,” asks: “So, was ancient Rome modern?” and proposes that the answer would be affirmative if one considers modernity as, inter alia, rationalization, professionalization, public education and rejection of more primitive lifestyles.¹ This makes sense since the term ‘modern’ itself is of pre-modern origin, making its first uncritical appearance, i.e. without criticizing either new or old, in the sixth century author Cassidorus. It was first used critically by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*, where the habits of his contemporary religious life are criticized for not being like those of ancients.² Many centuries before Dante, ancient Chinese sages debated whether it was better to adhere to the old ways or to discover and walk new paths in order to bring order to the war-torn society of those times. These vehement debates, often taking place in the royal courts, helped crystallize the intellectual positions on the said question. The present endeavor explores the intellectual map of ancient China with a view to analyze and interpret the vocabulary employed in those old vs. new debates, bring out the nuances involved in the positions taken by each school and the mutual relations between them.

Review of Literature

Most studies of Confucianism note its conservative spirit since this is one of its more obvious characteristics. We have not, however, come across any study specially focusing the centuries long debate, among major schools of thought of ancient China, on following the ancients and submitting to the dictates of the present. The only work that would seem to constitute an exception is Michael Puett’s *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China*.³ This seminal work studies the debates in early China on questions like ‘how and under what circumstances new institutions could be legitimately fashioned?’ and the larger questions concerning creation and innovation like those related to the origin of human culture and the relationship of Sage to that innovation.⁴ Our proposed work differs from this important study, firstly, in selecting for analysis a different, though related, dimension of the controversy. Instead of focusing on debates about creativity, legitimacy and limits of innovation, origin of culture and its relation to nature and role of sages in creating culture, our concern here is the complexity of attitudes towards the old, past, and tradition among the early Chinese thinkers and court advisors. So, whereas the key term for Puett’s work is ‘zuo’ {explained by him as meaning ‘arise, be active, build, make and create’⁵} we discuss and interpret a

¹ Yakov Rabkin and Mikhail Minakov, eds., *Demodernization: Future in the Past* (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2018).

² Patricia Seed, “Early Modernity: History of a Word,” *CR: The New Continental Review* 2, no. 2 (2002): 1-16.

³ Michael Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

wide range of Chinese vocabulary used in the discussions and debates regarding the old but concentrate more on the pair *gu* (old) and *jin* (contemporary; present). In a word, whereas Puett's work looks at the attitudes to 'creativity' and 'innovation', we are interested in the other side of this coin, namely 'following' or 'imitating' the past. Second, although many of the texts we are going to study have been discussed in Puett's work, especially from the Confucian thinkers, the two other schools, the Daoists and the Legalists make slight appearance, with just one or two passages cited and discussed. We are going to look at the broader spectrum of attitudes towards the past and tradition. The fourth chapter of Herbert Fingarette's brief but seminal work *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, titled "Traditionalist or Visionary?"¹ is seemingly very relevant to the present inquiry. It deals, however, with Confucius and not Confucianism as we wish to do here, it moreover, under the influence of historical criticism, limits itself to only the first fifteen books of *The Analects*. Being a trained philosopher, rather than a sinologist, as the author admits, his work offers more philosophizing about the nature of Confucius' wider project than textual analysis. The chapter in question discusses only one saying from the *Analects*. We are going to offer analysis of all relevant textual evidence from the works not only of Confucius but of all other things we discuss here. We will, however critically engage with some of his arguments at an appropriate place.

A. Associated Vocabulary

The well-known two-way relationship between thought and language is especially apparent in and pertinent to the ancient Chinese thought due to the unique pictographic nature of Chinese language. Hence, we find it important to look at the etymology, semantics and usage of some used characters frequently used by classical Chinese thinkers on the issue at hand.² In order to discover the original meaning of any Chinese character the oldest and the most important source is the Oracle bones from Shang Dynasty (1600-1050 BC) and then bronze vessels of (the late Shang and early) Zhou Dynasty (1046-256BC). We shall try, wherever possible and plausible, to draw conclusions regarding thought from the pictographic origins of the concerned characters.

Gu-Jin: The Chinese word most commonly used by the ancient thinkers to denote 'old' is "gu" (古). In its ancient form, found on oracle bones was a combination of the pictogram for 'shield' above that for a 'mouth.' The former was a symbol of warfare while the latter signified 'speaking of or narrating' so it meant narrating the account of warfare at the year's end and eventually came to mean 'antiquity.'³ By the Spring and Autumn Period, (c. 771 – 256 BCE), when the founders of three important schools flourished, the upper

¹ Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 57-71.

² Our source for the Chinese text of the writing of Classical philosophers has been *The Chinese Text Project*, accessed August 13, 2025, <https://ctext.org/>.

³ "Gu zi de qi ming," accessed August 13, 2025, https://88qm.cn/qumingzidian/wenzhang_3_3720.html.

part had been transformed into the ideograph for ‘ten’ (shi 十).¹ So this composition came to consist of ‘ten’ above and ‘mouth’(kou 口) and has remained so to the present day. According to the oldest dictionary of Chinese Shuowen Jiezi (composed circa 100CE), this implies cong shi kou ‘passing through ‘ten (not of course to be taken literally) mouths.’² So in the present context, we are justified to point out that the word originally contained a sense of continuity. This word is most often, but not always, contrasted with the word jin (今) (‘now’, ‘modern’ ‘nowadays’) which is used most frequently by the ancient Chinese writers to criticize their contemporary times.³ Incidentally ‘jin’ also includes, as far as its etymological origin indicates⁴ the picture of a ‘mouth’, though an inverted one, and something coming out of it, represented by a dot.⁵ Might we speculate from this contrast of the old depicted as something (sayings, teachings etc.) continuously coming straight out of human mouths and the new depicted as the words spoken by an inverted mouth that the Chinese language, even in its original form, expressed the belief that the modern/present was an inversion of the traditional/past?

Chuan: The word gu as interpreted above, would be close in meaning to ‘chuan’ 傳 (to transmit, to hand over, record, narrative; instruction), which in its turn is the closest word for ‘tradition’ in Chinese language. ⁶ This word is not restricted to the past, because it has been used to mean ‘handing down to the future generations’ as we find, for example, in Mencius.⁽⁷⁾ Shuowen Jiezi records that it meant a ‘letter or a wooden tally.’⁽⁸⁾ Obviously ‘handing over’ is something related to ‘a letter,’ while the semantic connection of such a word to a tally is also very significant. Firstly, a tally is something given by the emperor himself to his military leader as a sign of authority. Secondly, it consisted of two mutually fitting parts and the one given by the commander to his subordinate must fit in with the peace retained by him to complete a text or sign engrave on both parts. The pictogram from which ‘chuan’ developed consists of ‘man’ on the left side and a ‘drop-spindle’ on the right. Since a drop spindle was used for spinning fibers into yarns or thread, with a

¹ See, Jian-Hsin Wu, *The Way of Chinese Characters: The Origin of 670 Essential Words* (Boston: Cheng and Tsui, 2016), 71.

² “Shuowen Jiezi,” accessed August 13, 2025, <http://www.shuowenjiezi.com/h.php?id=1457>.

³ See for instance, Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. James Legge (East Bridgewater, MA: World Publications Group Inc., 2008), 91; Han Fei Zi, *The Complete Works of Han Fei Tzu*, trans., W.K. Liao (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1959), II: 247; Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans., John C.H. Wu (Boston: Shambhala, 1989), 136. All references to *The Analects* are from this edition, unless otherwise specified.

⁴ See “Chinese Etymology,” accessed January 27, 2024, <https://hanziyuan.net/#%E4%BB%8A>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ It is used as ‘instruction’ in Confucius, *The Analects*, I:4; as ‘delegating’ in *Li Chi: Book of Rites*, trans., James Legge, (New York: University Books, 1967), I:66; while its usage as ‘transmitting’ and as ‘records’ can be seen, inter alia, respectively in Meng Zi, *Mencius*, trans. Irene Bloom, edited by Philip J. Ivanhoe, (New York Columbia University Press, 2009), 7 and 21.

⁷ See Meng Zi, *Mencius*, 93.

⁸ See 古 in “Shuowen Jiezi,” accessed August 13, 2025, <http://www.shuowenjiezi.com/h.php?id=1457>.

little use of imagination its choice by the ancient Chinese to depict ‘tradition’ can be made sense of. Moreover, a thread as a symbol of unity and continuity is employed by some of the classical Chinese thinkers. Xun Zi, the great but sidelined Confucian thinker whom we shall be discussing below, using the analogy of ‘thread’ in this context says: “The unchanging element among the reigns of the hundred kings can serve as the binding thread of the Way.”¹ So turning fibers into thread might be considered ‘formation of the tradition’ while turning a thread into yarn can be understood to mean converting an existing and living tradition into finished canon for consumption of the adherents. Thus, it is very significant that “silk thread” (mi) is also present in the character ‘Jing’ (‘scripture’ or ‘classic’), which denotes the highest and most respected category of writings in the Chinese tradition. Now a classic is something that can result from the thread of a tradition or it can be the starting point of one.

However, another interpretation of the right side component of the word ‘chuan’ as “an ox led by the ring passed through the nose,” is mentioned by Leon Wieger, and declared unlikely, but still seems interesting and significant.⁽²⁾ This significance lies in the fact that on this interpretation it would consist of a human being leading an ox through a rope passing through its nose, to assure its submission. This in turn would highlight the compliance with the handed down teaching expected from everyone. Here Xunzi again affords us important evidence, ‘If one has mastered the thread there will be no chaos...’⁽¹⁾ So there are two possible interpretations of the character chuan and both are very poignant in the context of endeavor at hand. The first readings, respectively as ‘letter’ and ‘tally’ emphasize the elements of unity and continuity in ‘tradition’ while the second interpretation as an ‘ox being lead’ brings out the element of authoritativeness.

Jiu-Xian: In addition to gu-jin Chinese thinkers use in this context two other expressions Jiu 舊 and Xian 先. According to its etymology, the character jiu is composed of pictogram for ‘bird-egret’ above and that for ‘mortar’ below which is also its phonetic component. Originally jiu meant ‘return to old nest’ as it possibly depicted an osprey who comes back to its old nest (臼). This component of returning to the origin clearly has a normative hint to it. Therefore, the instances of its applications in the ancient Chinese literature include ‘ancestors’ ‘style’ and ‘statutes and laws’ and ‘models.’³ In contrast to the character gu, which usually means ‘something ancient,’ jiu indicates ‘something worn,

¹ Xun Zi, *Xunzi: The Complete Works*, trans. Eric L. Hutton, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 181. It must be noted that the text does not contain the Chinese word for ‘thread’ (xian) here but mentions ‘money’ (guan) i.e. ‘pierced coins strung together,’ hence this usage of this word as a verb for ‘to string.’ See John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 302-303.

² Leon Wieger, *Chinese Characters: Their Origin, Etymology, History, Classification and Signification* (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corporation, 1965), 229.

³ See respectively, *Guanzi*, trans., W. Allyn Rickett (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001) I:53; Confucius, *Analects*, 73.

being used for a long time.’(2) It also does not simply indicate the temporal dimension of belonging to remote past but also involves an element of having been in use and employment. However, this employment over an extended period of time does not guarantee continued relevance. That is to say, having been in use can imply either durability or being worn out, consequently, futility. This is why Han Fei Zi (d.233 BC), calls the revered Confucian classics, ‘obsolete learning’ (jiu zhi xue).¹ Thus this character also contains a hint to the element of continuity since it is applied to something that has existed for a long time. Jiu is contrasted to the word ‘xin 新’ (new).(3) The pictographic form of this word, in its turn, contains an ‘axe’ to the right of ‘a tree’ and is interpreted by the etymologists as representing ‘freshly cut firewood’ which has been borrowed to mean ‘fresh’ or ‘new.’

The original meaning of the word ‘Xian’ is ‘to walk ahead of someone’ and this is indicated by its composition in the oracle bone script. The pictogram depicted a ‘foot’ above a ‘person’. With the passage of time, it came to mean the ‘ancients’ ‘ancestors’ and ‘the past.’(2) We observe in this etymological explanation the significant suggestion that the past ones are not only those who have ‘walked before’ us, we are, and perhaps, should be, following their footsteps, because the pictogram can also be read as a person following the footsteps of someone who has already passed through that way. Many writers, some of the opponents of Confucius as well as himself and his followers, frequently evoke the ‘former kings (xian wang) or the ‘former sages’ (xian sheng)³ as models to be emulated.

Unlike the gu-jin pair, xian intrinsically expresses a comparative/relative degree and is therefore contrasted to ‘hou’ {latter}.(4) This xian-hou contrast contains a normative element in addition to the temporal or historical one just mentioned. In this sense it means the first in order of priority. Thus, when asked ‘how to exalt virtue?’ Confucius replies, “If doing what is to be done be made the first (xian) business and success a secondary (hou) consideration - is not this the way to exalt virtue?”(5)

¹ Han Fei Zi, *The Complete Works*, Vol. II: 247; Another legalist work, *The Book of Lord Shang* uses it in the neutral sense of ‘past, former and original.’ See Shang Yang, *Shang Jun Shu: The Book of Lord Shang*, trans., Yuri Pines (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 198; The same usage is found in *Zhuang Zi* (Hunan: People’s Publishing House, 1999), II: 436. This word does not occur in the other fundamental Daoist text, *Dao De Jing* of Lao Zi.

² Li Leyi, *Hanzi Yanbian Wu Bai Li* (Beijing: Yuyan Xue Yuan Chu Ban She: 1992), 368.

³ *The Historical Classic* uses this expression for the first time with reference to the sage kings Yao and Shun, Confucius, *Shoo King*, 125-129; Meng Zi, *Mencius*, 70.

⁴ Although instances of its contrast with the character *jin* can also be found, for example Meng Zi, *Mencius*, 35 where the seeds of goodness are described with reference to former kings and in those people contemporary with Mencius.

⁵ Confucius, *The Analects*, 84.

This brief discussion of the Chinese vocabulary in the light of pictographic origins of related characters shows how very significant semantic components like unity, continuity, following and returning are embedded in the Chinese peoples' understanding from the earliest known example of their writing. We can now turn to the core of present endeavor, namely the various intellectual positions regarding following the old exemplars, in the ancient Chinese thought, starting in this part with Confucianism.

Classical Confucianism

To understand the position of classical Confucianism on the issue under discussion we shall mainly focus on Lun Yu (Analects of Confucius) his conversations and sayings collected by his disciples after his death. However, we must also explore some of the ancient classics which ultimately came to constitute the canon of classical Confucianism. Two of these Shu Jing (The Historical Classic or The Book of Documents) and Li Ji (The Book of Rites), are the most pertinent and fertile source for the present discussion. However, since the compilation of the latter work in its present form goes back only to the Eastern Han Dynasty, it does not fall within the ancient period we are focussing here. So, we must suffice with the former.

Shu Jing records ancient Chinese history from the period of Emperor Yao (2356BC) to that of Ping Wang (d. 721 BC) of the Zhou Dynasty. Contrary to our expectation, the chronology of events forms a small part of this book and most of it explains how the morally ideal emperors of one dynasty were bestowed tien ming (Heavenly Right to Rule; Mandate of Heaven) and how their descendants gradually lost it due to corruption. Thus, we find here a recurring pattern which reveals the ancient, possibly pre-Confucian, Chinese non-progressive understanding of history: the earlier, the better. In the case of each dynasty, the first emperor is considered moral ideal, and the last emperor is presented as morally the worst person. The speeches of each founder are replete with elaborate lists of crimes of their defeated opponents.¹ Thus the founder of Xia, great Yu, Tang who established Shang dynasty and King Wu, the first emperor of Zhou, are depicted as the most righteous and their virtues are described in detail, both in relation to their people and in relation the deities.² On the other hand, the last emperors of Xia and Shang Jie (d. 1675 BC) and Shou (1046BC) are among the morally most depraved kings in entire Chinese history.³ Despite this, it is very significant and interesting that the idea of sage-king cuts across the dynastic division and the new dynasty owns, reveres and emulates the founders of the defeated previous dynasty. Thus, King Cheng (d. 1021BC), the second monarch of the newly established Zhou dynasty enfeoffed a half-brother of the

¹ See for instance, Confucius, *Shoo King*, 119 and 143.

² Ibid., 141.

³ Ibid., 152

toppled Shang/yin dynasty's abhorred last Emperor Shou. In his proclamation on that occasion, the Zhou King told Duke Wei:

“[U]pon examining the records of antiquity, I feel disposed to honour the virtuous (... founder of the Yin dynasty) Your ancestor Ching Tang attained to such veneration, perfection, enlargement and profundity that Imperial Heaven graciously aided him.”⁽¹⁾

The section that follows records King Wu's important proclamation to his brother Duke Kang, whom he advises to take as example the righteous founder of the previous dynasty: “Go therefore and extensively seek after (the records of) Yin's former wise kings (xian zhi wang) ... Do you also widely and extensively enquire after Shang's old and experienced men that you may settle your mind (in what is good)”. ²

However, in addition to the prevalence of this pattern of what Kai Vogeslang³ calls ‘exemplary history’, in the Shu Jing, we also find some clear imperatives of ‘imitating the ancients.’ Minister and sage Yue's advice to King Wu of Shang lays down the principle: “In business, not to imitate the ancients (gu), and yet to aim at perpetuating one's family is a thing I have never heard of. ... Reflect on the former kings (xian wang) as to their perfect example and you will be perpetually without fault.”⁴

We shall find the echoes of this advice in the literature of the later period both in the recorded sayings of Confucius and its representations in some writings from the rival schools of thought.

These passages not only illustrate the conservative spirit of the ancient Chinese thinking but also make it hard to believe that the idea of *tien ming* (mandate of heaven) was invented, not as a serious ethico-political belief, but merely to justify the toppling of dynasties and establishing new ones, as some have maintained. This is because here we learn that the Dynastic founders and their early followers, never considered the whole clan ruling the former period as their Other rather they divided it on moral ground between those who respected the mandate of heaven and their remote descendants who did not. There are even instances recorded in the Shu Jing where concern and respect are shown to

¹ Ibid., 222-223.

² Ibid., 226. Also see this text for an explicit expression of the righteousness of the old kings of the toppled dynasty contrasted with the moral corruption of their present descendants resulting in the revocation of the *tien ming*. 244.

³ Kai Vogeslang, “The Historiography of Political Realism,” *Dao Companion to China's Fa Tradition*, ed. Yuri Pines (Cham: Springer Verlag, 2024), 354.

⁴ Ibid., 174-175. The word translated here as ‘business’ is *shi* and actually means ‘conducting the business of government’ or ‘serving the emperor.’ The translator seems to have translated it merely as business on the assumption that the context clarifies nature of the business in question.

the ancestors and officials of the rulers of the previous dynasty.¹ This understanding of dynastic history can be seen as an application of the general Chinese non-binary intimacy cultural orientation, symbolized by the yin-yang image.²

We now turn to Confucius himself and some of his early followers.

Confucius:

A reading of the Analects would prove beyond doubt that Confucius was no modernist. In addition to other passages where his teachings and dealings are described, at many places he presents his self-image as a follower of the past. Moreover, we also find him disparaging his times and sighing for the bygone days. If one considers only these passages, and similar ones in the works of his followers, Confucianism will surely seem to represent the extreme right. He is reported to have said:

"A transmitter and not a maker, believing in and loving the ancients, I venture to compare myself with our old Peng."³

"I am not one who was born in the possession of knowledge; I am one who is fond of antiquity, and earnest in seeking it there."⁴

"Zhou had the advantage of viewing the two past dynasties. How complete and elegant are its regulations! I follow Zhou."⁵

"The men of former (xian) times in the matters of ceremonies and music were rustics, it is said, while the men of these latter times, in ceremonies and music, are accomplished gentlemen. If I have occasion to use those things, I follow the men of former times."⁶

These passages, clearly indicating his reverence for the past, especially the Zhou culture, should be read in conjunction with the countless other places where he praises the Sage Kings from the ideal past, like Yao, Xun, Tang and the Duke of Zhou, to whom he was so

¹ Ibid., 189.

² I take the term intimacy orientation from Thomas Kasulis, *Intimacy or Integrity: Philosophy and Cultural Difference* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 2002).

³ Confucius, *The Analects*, 46. *Peng* can stand for Peng Zu mentioned by Zhuangzi who was a noble of the Shang dynasty and used to transmit old tales or Lao Zi, or both.

⁴ Confucius, *The Analects*, 49.

⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁶ Ibid., 71. For more on 'ceremonies and music' (*li yue*) mentioned here see Geir Sigurðsson, *Confucian Propriety and Ritual Learning: A Philosophical Interpretation* (New York: SUNY Press, 2015).

much intellectually, and one may say, spiritually attached that he waited to have dreams of him.(1)

In the following passages we find Confucius criticize his own times in view of the ideal past:

"In ancient times, men learned with a view to their own improvement. Nowadays (jin), men learn with a view to the approbation of others."²

A disciple of Confucius, Zi Gong, asking him about moral qualities possessed by various grades of the state officials finally inquired, "Of what sort are those of the present day (jin zhi), who engage in government?" The Master said "Pooh! They are so many pecks and hampers, not worth being taken into account."³

These two passages depict Confucius as someone dissatisfied with the moral condition of his day, like most of the great sages.

However, In the Analects we find another set of passages which would seem to qualify the pure conservative image of Confucius implied by the ones just considered. These are the places where we find him trying, in some way to establish a sort of middle ground between the two extremes of blind imitation and wholesale rejection of the past and promoting a way of creative interaction with the customs and wisdom received from the past. Some of these passages, as we shall see, are not unambiguous and need some interpretation. We have therefore to consider their original text as well as multiple translations.

In the second book of The Analects, we read the following words:

“Wen gu er zhi xin,
ke yi wei shi yi

Let us first note the following:

1. This is a conditional statement where the first line is antecedent and the second a consequent. So, to paraphrase, without giving out too much, “if you do ‘wen’ to

¹ For the praise of the first three, see Confucius, *The Analects*, 137. In the chapter “Shu Er” section 5 he is reported to have said, "Extreme is my decay. For a long time, I have not dreamed, as I was wont to do, that I saw the duke of Zhou." Ibid., 47. Also see pages 56-57.

² Confucius, *The Analects*, 99.

³ Ibid., 91.

the ‘gu’ (old), you can act as teacher. We are interested mainly in the five-character first line.

2. The first line enunciates a relationship between ‘the old’ (gu) and the ‘fresh’ or ‘new’ (xin). So whatever interpretation of the relationship we might eventually settle on, this remark would show a moderate and reconciliatory thread in the thinking of Confucius on the question of the old and the new, simply because he combines both in whatever manner.
3. Now, this line consists of two verbal phrases [*wen* (v) *gu* and *zhi* (v) *xin*] separated by the conjunction ‘er’ in the middle. Without committing to any particular interpretation of the crucial words here, we can present the bare structure as ‘do/doing *wen* to the old and/so as to know the new/fresh.’
4. We have already analyzed the character *gu*, but we must pay attention here to ‘wen’. Now, 温 (wen) is composed of two parts: the three dots on the left 氵 represent ‘water’ while the right-side character 日 stands for ‘compassion.’¹ This combination might be interpreted as indicating that water is something compassionate since it does not harm, hence its application to ‘lukewarm.’ As a verb this word used to mean ‘to warm.’ Thus, the *Classic of Rites (Li Ji)* considers as part of a filial son’s conduct, “to warm {the bed for the parents} in winter and to cool it {in the summer (dong *wen* er xia qing).”² When the word *wen* is used as an adjective, it stands for ‘mild; kind; benign and plain.’³ It can also be used as an abstract noun in the sense of ‘mildness’ or ‘gentleness’: “Gentleness and goodness are the roots of humanity.”⁴
5. This crucial word has been variously translated. Some translators keep their rendering close to its literal meaning while others take more liberty.
 - a. The great sinologist James Legge translates it as ‘cherishing;’
 - b. Edward Slingerland, who renders the word as ‘keeping alive,’ presents two interpretations of the word *gu* (old).⁵ This rendering is same as the one by Ezra Pound and is reminiscent of the one by Arthur Waley who thought the word meant ‘reanimating.’⁶ Recognizing the literal meaning as ‘warming up’ Waley aptly comments that the business of a teacher is to give fresh life to the Scriptures so that they apply to the modern life.” He also relates it to a passage from the previous chapter where Zi Gong is praised by the Master for quickly quoting a relevant piece from *The Classic of Poetry*, something

¹ Chinese Etymology, assessed August 13, 2025, <https://hanziyuan.net/#%E6%BA%AB>

² *Li Chi: Book of Rites*, I:67.

³ Zi Si, *Focusing the Familiar: A Translation and Philosophical Interpretation of the Zhongyong*, trans. Roger T. Ames, and David L. Hall (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, Press, 2001), 114.

⁴ Kong Fu Zi, *Li Chi*, II. 263.

⁵ Confucius, *Analects*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company), 12.

⁶ Ezra Pound, *Confucian Analects* (London: Peter Owen Limited, 1956), 15; Confucius, *Analects of Confucius*, trans. Arthur Waley (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.: 1938), 90.

- which Waley, understandably, sees as a case of being ‘a true teacher by *reanimating* a passage from the *Songs*.¹
- c. Near the end of 19th century, we find William Jennings understating the phrase ‘gu wen’ in the sense of being ‘versed in ancient lore.’² Almost after a century, Roger Ames is seen interpreting it as ‘reviewing’³
 - d. Professor Peimin Ni’s understanding of this word is “Acquiring the new from warming up the old...”⁴
6. This recent reading is interesting because it brings us to the word *er* that connects the two pairs of words (*wen gu* and *zhi xin*). This particular translation simply ignores this word and collapses the pairs together in a dynamic relation between the old and new which is anyway in line with the overall import of the saying under discussion. Other translators we have referred to treat the word differently. Jennings, Slingerland and Pound translate it simply as ‘and’ leaving it to the reader to decide how to relate the old and new in the light of this conjunction. Legge, and Ames are more explicit and interpret the word, respectively as ‘so as’ and ‘as a means of.’

It is clear from the above discussion of some of the translations and interpretations of this crucial Confucian dictum that Confucius wanted his disciples by no means to be blind followers of the past. He certainly wanted them to be respectfully immersed in the tradition but with a view to, or at least, along with knowing the present, fresh and the new.

There is another interesting passage in *the Analects* which depicts the master practically demonstrating that he could use his discretion and be open and broadminded in his ‘reanimating’ or ‘cherishing’ the old, in a way that implies that there is neither something inherently laudable in following the past nor anything necessarily wrong with deviating from the traditional teaching and flowing with the current. In what follows, he presents himself simultaneously being a follower of the traditional practices and someone who deviates from them.

The Master said, "The linen cap is prescribed by the rules of ceremony, but now a silk one is worn. It is economical (儉), and I follow the common practice. Bowing below the hall is prescribed by the rules of ceremony, but

¹ Ibid., 87, note. 4.

² William Jennings, *The Confucian Analects* (London: George Routledge and Sons Limited, 1895), 48.

³ Roger T. Ames, *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), 78.

⁴ Peimin Ni, *Understanding the Analects of Confucius: A New Translation of Lunyu with Annotations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), 103.

now the practice is to bow only after ascending it. That is arrogant. I continue to bow below the hall, though I oppose the common practice."¹

It is significant, however, that Confucius assigns a reason for his deviation from the rule of propriety prescribed by the tradition and is not doing so simply because of some current 'fashion' and that reason is the current, *non-traditional* practice being 'jian', 'economical', 'parsimonious' or 'frugal'. 'Jian' is a value Confucius speaks highly of, as also reported elsewhere in the *Analects*. At one of these occasions, he is reported to have said, "Extravagance leads to insubordination, and parsimony to meanness. It is better to be mean than to be insubordinate."² When asked by someone impressed by the ability of Confucius to get information from any state he visits, Zi Gong replied, "Our master is benign, upright, courteous, temperate, and complaisant and thus he gets his information."³ Thus Confucius not only taught temperance and frugality, he also embodied it, or at least was seen as embodying it by his close disciples. This dynamic approach to dealing with the traditional rules of propriety, anyway, can be seen as an application of his famous teaching in which he emphasizes the complementarity of 'studying' or 'learning' and 'thinking,': "Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous."⁴

It is in this light that one must read a passage in the *Zhong Yong* chapter of the *Classic of Rites (Li Ji)* where Confucius declares: "...let a man who is living in the present age (sheng yu jin zhi shi) go back to the ways of antiquity (fan gu zhi dao); on the persons of all who act thus calamities will be sure to come."⁵ If we try to understand this statement in isolation, Confucius would seem to be contradicting himself. We therefore consider Andrew Plaks perfectly justified in adding the adverb 'stubbornly' in his rendering of the statement in question thus: "one who reverts stubbornly to the ways of the past."⁶ Same concession can be made to its French translation as "ramener les usages anciens ('to restore the ways of the old')."⁷ Thus, the statement from *Zhong Yong* does not contradict Confucius' earlier teaching about creatively interacting with the past in order to deal with the present, it can be interpreted to imply that what really counts is the manner in which one does so, so reverting to the old ways and taking them as models is still imperative but one is not supposed to do that in a stubborn manner, otherwise it would be calamitous. These translations and this interpretation not only remove an apparent contradiction, but it can also be supported by textual evidence as Confucius himself seems to be flexible in his adherence to the ways of the ancients. The *Analects* passage about linen cap discussed

¹ Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, 58.

² Ibid., 52.

³ Ibid. 16.

⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁵ James Legge, *Li Ji*, II. 323-324.

⁶ Andrew Plaks, *Ta Hsueh and Chung Yung* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 49.

⁷ Séraphin Couvreur, *L'invariable milieu. Tchoung-Young* (Nice: Editions des Cahiers Astrologiques, 1952), 28.

above is a case in point. Moreover Zhu Xi (d. 1200), the famous neo-Confucian thinker of the Song times, in his commentary on the *Zhongyong* substitutes the word ‘fu’ for ‘fan’ in the sentence under discussion. In this light it would mean that what the master is criticizing in this statement is the ‘duplication’ of the ancient ways rather than an open minded and creative interaction with them. This would be the third justification for understanding the word ‘follow’ as ‘stubbornly follow’ or as ‘restoring.’

But in whatever manner one understands this word, it is clear that the statement in question stands in complete contrast to the usual pro-tradition tendency of sayings of Confucius and must be given due weightage in our final assessment of the Confucian stance by refraining from declaring him an advocate of blind imitation of the past.

The following passage from the *Analects* has also caused the traditional commentators quite a lot of trouble. Let us begin with a minimalist rendering of the Chinese text before looking at various translations and some of the commentaries. Hopefully this procedure will highlight the complexities involved in the text as well as the comparative merits and demerits of some prominent translations.

Zi Zhang wen (Zi Zhang asked) *shan ren zhi dao* (good person’s way);
Zi Yue {the Master said}: “*Bu Jian Ji* {Does not tread in the footsteps}
Yi Bu Ru Yu Shi {also does not enter the inner chamber}.”¹

Since Chinese is a skeletal language in which separate words for number, gender or tense are not necessarily mentioned, one has at once greater freedom of translation and greater difficulty in determining the exact intention of the author. Therefore, the translators usually do not suffice such minimalist renderings and prefer to supply words qualifying and determining the meaning of the text. As we saw above, this can solve problems, but it can also create them. We can note such explanatory additions in James Legge’s translation, marked here in italics: “Zi Zhang asked what the characteristics of the good man were. The Master said, “He *does not tread* in the footsteps of others, but moreover, he does not enter the chamber of the sage.” Now it makes little sense that a teacher of morality who always takes pride in ‘following the footsteps’ of Zhou Kings, or Yao and Shun, would say that a good person is the one who does *not* follow the footsteps of others and does *not* enter ‘the inner chamber,’ an expression that the traditional exegetes of *Analects* interpret as ‘Sagehood’ which is the highest degree of moral perfection. One way, quite familiar for us by now, out of this quandary is proposed by Kong Anguo and Huang Kan who think that the words here mean that the good people do not walk *exactly* in the footsteps of others, which according to Peimin Ni implies that ‘they have some creativity.’² A second interpretation is that a morally accomplished person would be the one who, in spite of not having yet achieved the level of the sagehood, has attained to a state where it is not

¹ Confucius, *The Analects*, 75.

² Peimin Ni, *Understanding the Analects of Confucius*, 270.

necessary anymore to follow others' footsteps. Peimin Ni, following Kongguan Sen's reading translates the passage in a way which not only resolves the internal conflict between two parts of this statement, but the whole statement is also aligned with the standard conservative position that dominates the Confucian teaching. He thus translates the statement as, "Without walking in the footsteps of others, one would not be able to enter the inner chamber."¹ Now, although this translation also adds some meat to the skeleton of original Chinese text, this it does in a different manner that that of Jame Legge and is able to solve the problematic aspect of the statement.

We noted earlier that in spite of the predominance of following the tradition in Confucius, he is not rigid in that and leaves openings for modifications and adaptations according to circumstances. We, however, cannot agree with Herbert Fingarette's claim that 'Confucius used the narrative of mythic past in the service of a new ideal grounded in radically new insight into man's essential nature' because he was 'the creator of a new ideal, not an apologist for an old one.'² Fingarette's arguments for these claims are too speculative. Moreover, it seems to contain an internal contradiction. On the one hand, he appears to be using a sort of benevolent hermeneutics of suspicion when he sees Confucius' call to follow the ideal past simply a means to unify people to form an ideal society and to provide a convincing ground to the concept of ritual propriety. But he takes the claim made by Confucius that he has been faithful to and loved the Ancients.³ What seems to us to be more acceptable characterization of Confucius' traditionalism is the following statement Fingarette himself makes near his conclusion: "Only as we grow up genuinely shaped, through and through, by traditional ways can we be human; only as we reanimate this tradition where new circumstances render it otiose can we preserve integrity and direction in our life."⁴ So our reading of Confucius shows him to be a genuine but open-minded believer in the normative worth of ancient Chinese tradition rather than someone who simply found the idea of tradition useful for his project.

Having devoted considerable space to Confucius, we must turn now to two of his most prominent intellectual successors in ancient China, Meng Zi and Xun Zi.

Mencius

Now, as we pointed out above, Mencius (391-308 BC) is completely in accord with the overwhelming traditionalist tendencies of Confucius, and one does not find in him ambiguous and problematic statements on the old-versus new issue. He is all praise for the ancients, and there are countless references in his work to their ways and practices as models to be applied and emulated. There are also passages where he contrasts his contemporary times with the ancients, especially the sage kings and criticizing his times.

¹ Ibid., 271.

² Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, 60.

³ Ibid., 68.

⁴ Ibid., 69.

For example, he cites the ancients in order to explain why his mourning for his mother surpassed that for his father: “When they were not prevented, and had the money, the ancients all used this style. Why should I alone not do so?”¹ Like Confucius he also shows a disparaging attitude towards his own times and expresses his reverence for the good old days: “when the superior men of old had errors, they reformed them. The superior men of the present time, when they have errors, persist in them.”²

On the other hand, there are some interesting places in the text where Mencius implies continuity between the past and present. Mencius tells the King of Qi during an interview that he has heard about the king’s love of music. The king blushes and humbly replies, “I am unable to love the music of the ancient sovereigns; I only love the music that suits the manners of the present age.” So, the king felt somewhat ashamed when Mencius brought up his love for music, which he himself considered not as good as the great traditional music but one that simply suited the degenerate taste and ways of his own days. Mencius, however, instead of praising the old, and, as one would expect, elaborating what is wrong with the modern music, replied, “If your Majesty’s love of music were very great, Qi would be near to a state of good government! The music of the present day is just like the music of antiquity, as regards affecting that.”³ Mencius obviously denies the existence of any radical discontinuity between music of the past and that of the day, unlike what was felt by the king.

Elsewhere, Mencius indirectly points out either something negative originating from antiquity or some advantage unique to his contemporary times, that was not available to the ancients or possible in the old days. After claiming that taxation of merchants began with a greedy fellow in ancient times, Mencius says:

“At the present time, if humane government were established in a state of ten thousand chariots, the people would be as pleased as if they had been freed from hanging upside down. Thus, one can, with half the effort of the ancients, bring about twice their achievements—if only it is done now.”⁴

In addition to breaking the rigid moral divide between the ideal past and his own times, the last sentence contains a remarkable affinity with an idea found in numerous religious traditions, of the existence of compensatory elements in the dark ages of degeneration that come near the end of days. Martin Lings points out ‘the great compensations for the difficulties of the Dark age’ which are ‘bound to be more and more marked as the age

¹ Meng Zi, *Mencius*, 43.

² *Ibid.*, 45. The term ‘superior men’ (*jun zi*), elsewhere translated as ‘gentleman’ and which is the standard Confucian epithet for the (realistically achievable) ideal personality, cannot here be taken in that moral sense but must be interpreted in the mundane (and historically original) sense of ‘a high official’ or ‘noble by birth’ (*da ren*). Otherwise, the statement would lose its whole point and would imply that a morally accomplished person can be the one who persists in his errors rather than rectifying them.

³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

draws to its close,' and provides instances from three religions, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism.¹ The similarity between these instances and the passage from Mencius is incredible, although one must recognize that the context of the statement made by him is hardly of a religious, spiritual or metaphysical nature. However, within the setting of the question we have been concerned with, this contextual disparity would not make any significant difference.

Before moving on, let us reiterate that, like Confucius himself, the predominant conservative and past-oriented tendency of Mencius must be seen and understood in combination with the passages where he is taking a more nuanced approach toward the old-new and past-present divide.

Xunzi

The last intellectual figure we are left is that of Xun Kuang (thrived: late warring states period). The text recording his teachings and ideas is also known as *Xunzi*. Xun Zi disagreed with Mencius over the goodness of human nature, but both agreed that human nature is amenable to rectification by education. His name and fame were tarnished in the later Chinese history, post Tang Dynasty (618-907) as an unorthodox interpreter of Confucius and was replaced by Mencius during and since the Song Dynasty (960-1270), recent scholarship shows that '*Xunzi* is closer in content to *Analects* than *Mencius*.'²

On the question under discussion here, we find his response structured along the same lines at those found in Confucius and Mencius. That is to say, he is in wide agreement with his master and his great predecessor in taking a pro-tradition standpoint, and in general disparaging the mores of his own time but then there are interesting qualifications and nuances that he makes to his general position, which in the present case seem to be more developed and complex than before. In addition, perhaps for the first time within Classical Confucianism, we come across certain remarks of 'second order' type about nature, meaning, spirit and essence of 'following the old behavioral models.' In what follows, we present, analyze and discuss passages representing each of these dimensions of Xun Zi's standpoint regarding the issue of old versus new.

Xun Zi refers to the ancients as authorities and models in many places in the text. For instance in the fifth chapter "Against Physiognomy" He bases his critique on, *inter alia*, the fact that the ancients (*gu zhi*: *of old*) would not have approved physiognomy.³ Elsewhere he describes and lauds the way of ancients in employing the people, considering its opposite an error but there is no indication whether that error is committed in the present

¹ See Martin Lings, *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions* (London: Perennial Books, 1965), 74-75.

² Ryan Nichols et al., "Modeling the relationship between *Analects*, *Mencius* and *Xunzi*," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 77, no.1 (2018): 20.

³ Hutton, *Xunzi*, 32.

times.¹ Just like in Confucius and Mencius before him, here the great sage emperors appear again and again as moral exemplars.² We then find him emphasizing the past-present continuity: “To achieve order one must follow it, and ancient times and the present are one and same in this.”³ This last comment is polemic in nature as Xun Zi makes it to refute those who believe in a radical break between past and present and think that past is useless for dealing with the present. His claim here reminds us of the remark made by Mencius to the King of Qi as to the continuity between old and new music. Speaking of the *minor odes* part of the *Shi Jing*, he notes their conservative and past-oriented tendencies approvingly: “They hate the contemporary government and think longingly of past times. Their words have good form to them. Their sounds have sorrow in them.”⁴ All these examples indicate the Xunzi, in spite of having been considered ‘heterodox’ by the later tradition, followed in the footsteps of his predecessors as far as their conservatism is concerned.

Of many places where Xun zi laments the moral deterioration of his contemporary world and contrasts it with the ideal past, we could mention the following stanzas from a chapter called *The Working Songs*:

The present era has not one true king
It puts the good and worthy in dire woe.
Violent people feast upon fine meats
Those who are *ren* have mere dregs to swallow.⁵

In one of the most interesting and beautiful chapters of the entire text, *The Right Hand Vessel*, Xun Zi says, having described the golden past,:

“Today’s generation is not like that. They have made their teachings disorderly and have made their punishments profuse. When their people, being lost and confused, fall down in this regard, they then follow up by disciplining them.”⁶

It is significant that Xun Zi was not content with rebuking his times or enumerating their faults, but like some expert physicians, points out what is the most essential root-cause of all of them. Talking to his famous/notorious disciple Li Si (d. 208 BC), latter to become the Prime Minister to the First Chinese Emperor, he says: ‘You do not seek for answers in

¹ Ibid., 127.

² Emperor Yao’s transforming power through killing just 3 persons is praised in *Xunzi*, 159.

³ Hutton, *Xunzi*, 165.

⁴ Ibid., 312

⁵ Ibid., 266

⁶ Ibid.,320.

what is fundamental but rather search for them in what is secondary.”¹ This characteristically Confucian remark indicates the fundamental importance attached to ‘discernment’ between the external and the internal, the fundamental and the secondary and the first and the last, as the first principle.²

Finally, we need to see if some general principles or features of ‘tradition-following’ can be derived from Xun Zi.

1. An important feature of Xun Zi’s thought here is his recognition of a multiplicity of ancient models to be followed by later generations. This means that he did not hold a monolithic idea of the past but understood that even for those who are ready to tread in the footsteps of former sages, there is not always a clear cut and single road to choose. While this variety of ancient paradigms led another school, as we shall see, to reject the very idea of following past models, Xun Zi did not draw this conclusion and thought it possible for people to use their discretion in choosing which model to follow: “If, in following its old models for government, you pick the best among them and then highlight and employ them, they are sufficient to make people fond of benefit submit compliantly.”³

2. But exactly how does one choose which ancient model to follow? Xun Zi’s answer to this question is doubly significant. On the one hand, it illustrates the point just made regarding his non-monolithic stance regarding the tradition. On the other hand, it brings to light a point of fundamental importance about the two forms of tradition itself. So, his answer to our question is ‘to look among the most clear among the sage kings.’⁴ Since by ‘clear’ he seems to mean here ‘clearly known to us’ therefore these would be the sage kings who are nearest to us in time. Thus, Xun Zi responds to those who would reject the later kings and like ‘to take their way from furthest antiquity’ by likening them to someone who rejects his own lord to serve another’s lord. The theoretical significance of this stance cannot be over-emphasized. The contrast here is not, as usual, between the old and the new, but between two kinds of the old itself, that is to say, tradition in its original, old and pristine form and tradition as it develops and unfolds in the present or at least in non-remote past. This contrast creates schism among many cultures between those who uphold their crystalized tradition and the ones who prefer to transcend everything that the passage of time has done to the tradition and would like to follow its pure form. Those who represent this second tendency are known as ‘puritans.’ Thus, Xun Zi affords us an ancient recognition of this important dimension of an issue of permanent significance.

¹ Ibid. 157. On Li Si, see Paul R Goldin, *After Confucius: Studies in Early Chinese Philosophy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 66-75.

² See Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), 85.

³ Hutton, *Xunzi*, 107.

⁴ Ibid., 35.

3. Among the classical Chinese thinkers, it was Mo Zi and his followers who had adopted a pragmatist and utilitarian approach to morality and governance and always emphasized the element of ‘profit’ or ‘benefit’ (*li*) as the element that makes some strategy valuable. They met staunch opposition, *inter alia*, on this point from Confucius and Mencius who never tire of dissuading royalty and common people alike from running after profit or benefit. Xun Zi is no different from them here. This would seem to imply that he considers model following as something of intrinsic value, regardless of what benefits accrue. The text does not take this position. In a philosophically very interesting chapter, *Against Fixations*, that manifests considerable affinity with the Daoist thought, Xun Zi wages a war against the habit of being *fixated* and declares this trait to be responsible for many errors. ‘Being fixated’ means “being blindly and fanatically attached to some concept, ideology or anything.’ Among examples of what people can be fixated at he mentions both ‘ancient past’ and ‘the present.’ So, it is clear that for him none of these has any intrinsic and exclusive value. Therefore, Xun Zi critiques all the rival schools from this point of view and tells us what each of them was *fixated* with.

4. While arguing against Mencius on the nature of human nature, Xun Zi states, “Accordingly those who are experts at theorizing about antiquity will certainly show how their ideas tally with the situation of the present.” (Gu, shang yang gu zhe, *bi you jie yu jin*)¹ While the general purpose of this statement is to show that the thesis of original goodness of human nature, upheld by Mencius, was just empty theoretical claim incapable of standing practical application or logical scrutiny, it is still relevant to our current discussion. Even as a passing comment, it still indicates something important about Xun Zi’s conception of the relationship between past and present. We have quoted here the translation by John Knoblock, rather than the one by Eric Hutton, because, in spite of containing more words than the original, it brings out an important element of the idea left out by the latter. Knoblock renders the expression *bi you jie yu jin* by ‘must tally with the situation of the present.’ The ‘tally’ is not arbitrary but is the result of reading ‘jie’ as an abbreviation for ‘fu jie’ i.e. a tally and brings out the fact the here Xun Zi is using the ancient tally as a metaphor for past-present relation.² So, past and present are the two complementary parts of an organic whole like the ancient imperial tally. Although the statement under discussion gives the impression that the past has to present itself before the more authoritative present and would be acceptable only after a nod from the latter, the metaphor of tally makes it abundantly clear that none of the two parts has an upper hand and the legitimacy of each depends on conformity to or relevance with the other. Thus, what we get from this statement is a wholistic conception of the relationship between past and present. And this conception would seem to show that his thought contained a radically new element, found, at least explicitly, neither in Confucius nor in Mencius.

¹ Ibid., 252; John Knoblock, *Xunzi*, III: 156.

² See Beida Zhhexuexi, *Xunzi Xinzhū* (Beijing: Beijing Daxue, 1979), 396.

5. Finally, there is an important question that concerns form versus spirit in following the tradition, and here we come across an exegetical problem in Xun Zi. This is because Xun zi, when talking about the ancient practices praying for the rain and divination, downplays here the internal dimension of tradition-following and emphasizes its external and social function. Denying any real connection between rain and sacrifices offered for it or divination and any actual contacts with the spirits, he offers a proto-functionalist and aesthetic interpretation of the institution of ritual:

One performs divination and only then decides on important affairs. But this is not to be regarded as bringing one what one seeks but rather it is done to give things proper form. Thus, the gentleman regards this as proper form, but the common people regard it as communicating with spirits.¹

The word translated here as ‘proper form’ by Hutton, and as ‘embellishment’ by John Knoblock, is 文 (wen), which is ‘a central concept of Chinese Civilization’ and in Zhou times it ‘referred to aesthetic patterns like those in textiles, tattoos, on bronze vessels or acoustically, of melodies.’² Then it took on the broader implications of ‘culture’ ‘or ‘civilization’ and it is in this sense that we find Confucius using at one place in the *Analects*.³ Both these applications of the word smack of ‘externality’ and ‘forms.’ The fact that ‘embellishing’ or ‘giving forms’ to activities is being contrasted here with having real communication with the spirits certainly manifests a ‘modernist’ element in Xun Zi. We can find some echoes of such an approach in modern ‘cultural religiosity’ where people continue to participate in social ceremonies without believing in their religious significance and roots.

The above is in stark contrast to what we learn from certain passages from the *Analects* and one narrative about the Master even in Xun Zi itself. What is implied in those places is that it is the spirit or substance that needs to be followed, and that forms and appearances really do not matter. In *Analects* we are told that a certain Zai Wo asked about the three years' mourning for parents, saying that one year was long enough. Thereupon, following conversation took place:

The Master said, "If you were, after a year, to eat good rice, and wear embroidered clothes, would you feel at ease?" "I should," replied Wo. The Master said, "If you can feel at ease, do it. But a superior man, during the whole period of mourning, does not enjoy pleasant food which he may eat,

¹ Hutton, *Xunzi*, 179; Knoblock, *Xunzi*, III: 19.

² Kern, Martin “Wen.” *The Encyclopedia of Confucianism*, edited by Xinzhong Yao (London: Routledge, 2003), 655.

³ Ibid.

nor derive pleasure from music which he may hear. He also does not feel at ease, if he is comfortably lodged. Therefore, he does not do what you propose. But now you feel at ease and may do it."¹

What we have here is a contrast between the external aspect of ‘following a traditional ritual’ and the ‘internal or emotion element’ involved in that practice. Significantly, the former is being considered decisive as compared to the latter. Hence one is allowed to deviate from a traditionally prescribed 3-year mourning period if one did not find anything ‘inside’ corresponding to the externally prescribed manifestation of bereavement, like eating coarse food etc. and ‘felt’ like returning to normal life before that.

Moreover, Xunzi narrates an encounter between Confucius and Duke Ai. The duke is told by Confucius: “To live in today’s world but focus one’s intentions on the way of the ancients, to dwell in today’s customs but dress in the clothes of the ancients—those who abide by these and still do wrong are few indeed, are they not?” Duke Ai takes these words a little too literally and says, “If so, then is anyone who dons court robes and court shoes and tucks an official tablet into his sash a worthy?” Confucius corrects him:

Not necessarily so. But one who wears ceremonial robes and hat and rides in the ceremonial cart does not focus his intentions on eating savory foods. One who wears the robes and shoes of mourning, leans on a cane, and eats gruel does not focus his intentions on wine and meat.²

This passage adds an inner dimension to this characteristic and downplays the dry and formalist aspects of emulating the sages. What one ‘intends’ is more important than whether or not what one wears is in line with ritualistic prescriptions. So, both passages highlight the inner, emotional, or substantial dimension, over against external and formalistic aspect.

However, when Xun zi asserts the divination must be practiced but only in order to be ‘formally correct’, so to speak, or ‘to embellish the occasion with ceremony’ he seems to be maintaining the contrary position. So, what sense can we make of this difference? Contemporary, politically correct, Chinese exegesis comments that he was an outstanding atheist who did not believe in praying to gods for rain but believed that it could be used to embellish politics and *deceive the masses*.³

¹ Confucius, *The Analects*, XVII:21.

² Ibid. 333.

³ See Beida Zhhexuexi, *Xunzi Xinzhu*, 277. Emphasis added.

Xun Zi being an atheist is an outdated and very controversial claim. And the accusation of intending to deceive the masses can also be ignored as unverifiable ideological rant as Xun Zi might have been a sincere believer in the objective necessity of just externally following rituals. But the fact remains that on the question of internal-external relationship in ritual following Xun Zi is taking a very different position than his and his master's general standpoint. Can this difference be resolved. We do not think there is any need for affectation in trying to do so. This difference might be just a part of the complexity of Xun Zi's thought. It is well known that Xun Zi contained certain elements which were incorporated by one of his former disciples into his synthesis of a school of thought that challenged Confucianism, inter alia, on taking the past as model. This, however, is an area to be explored in the second part of this paper.

Conclusion

From the analysis of Chinese vocabulary in terms of which Classical thinkers discussed their ideas on 'following the ideal past' we saw how significant semantic components of conservatism like *unity*, *continuity*, *following* and *returning to origin* are embedded in most frequently used characters. The ancient Confucian *Classic of History* was shown to contain a non-progressive understanding of history: the earlier, the better. We saw that this conception crosscuts dynastic borders, as the 'former' kings even of the enemies were revered. The ideas of three thinkers on the question before us contain a recurring pattern, consisting of three components: glorifying the past, disparaging the present and remarks of more complex and nuanced nature, which show some effort towards a non-dichotomous understanding of past-present/old-new relationship. Of the three masters we studied here, we find that the third component is less to be seen in the first two, Kong Zi and Meng Zi, while its presence is much prominent in Xun Zi, philosophically the most sophisticated and articulate of the trio. Therefore, it was from his writings only that we could infer a few general principles regarding imitation of the past and its limitations. We also saw in Xun Zi some radically new elements which seem to be contrary to the spirit of his predecessors. The presence of elements would seem to constitute an opening toward a rival school which took a completely opposite position on the issue of following past exemplars and on the general theme of relationship between morality and politics. A study of this and other flavors of thought would be the subject of the second part of this paper.