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# Ethical Justifications of Friendship in Xunzian Perspectives

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(Received 20 November 2023; accepted 20 November 2023)

## Abstract

Taking as the background the discourses on friendship initiated by ancient Confucian and Greek philosophers, this article is focused on Xunzi's perspective on friends by examining where and how he engages effectively ethical justifications of friendship. It will be argued that although Xunzi shows a kind of consistency with Confucius and Mencius, he comes to justify friendship through his own deliberations on human nature, on learning and education, and on the nature and function of human community. We will then proceed to examine the three perspectives Xunzi takes to highlight the ethical value of friends: friendship can be justified as it is needed in overcoming the inborn tendencies towards competition and strife; friendship can be justified because it is taken as supplementary to learning and education where friends are made equivalent to teachers in terms of moral influence and exemplary models; friendship can be justified because it is necessary for communities to function well and for individuals to lead a good life. We will finally come to the conclusion that these justifications constitute a unique ethics of friendship, which is not only significantly divergent from Greek propositions on friends but also differentiable, one way or another, from those proposed or presumed by Confucius and Mencius, and that the Xunzian philosophy of friendship is still an invaluable resource for us to draw on in the age of globalisation and de-globalisation.

**Keywords:** Xunzi; friendship; ethical justification; good life

As social beings, humans live and act in inter-personal networks. When being ridiculed by the recluse who claimed that a true master should have run away from all the world altogether, Confucius thought deeply of sociality as fundamental to human nature and human living, and satirized in response that 'One cannot associate with birds and beasts. Am I not a member of this human race? Who, then, is there for me to associate with?' (Confucius 1979: 150) With increasingly complicated and complex social

relations and interactions, we must, no matter where we are and who we are, consider carefully what kind of people we should be associated with or could shoulder common tasks together. Apart from certain family or kin members, the most intimate people with whom we would likely share our feelings, emotions, concerns and even destiny are those who are treated as 'friends'. It is therefore no surprise that in all types of early ethical discourses, from ancient Greeks to pre-Qin Confucians, friendship is always central to their discussion of the meaning and value of life and that the paradigm of good life is frequently used as the end to justify our friendly relations with some kinds of people as well as to justify our deliberately distancing from other kinds. However, since the good life itself is to be defined, how friendship contributes to the good in personal life and human flourishing as a whole has become part of intensive debates in ethical theories.

Taking as the background the discourses on friendship initiated by ancient Confucian and Greek philosophers, especially those of Confucius, Mencius and Aristotle, this article will be focused on Xunzi by investigating where and how he engages in ethical justifications of friendship. It will be argued that Xunzi's unique perspective on friendship must not be separated from his theories on human nature (*xing* 性), learning (*xue* 學) and community (*qun* 群), and that it is part of his reconstruction of ritual or ritual-propriety or ritual principles (*li* 禮) for social ethics, education and politics, because it is based on these theories that Xunzi formulates his answers to such questions as why we should have friends, how to make friends and what we would expect from friends. It is indeed true that friendship plays an important role in Xunzi's philosophy of what the life truly is or should be, and demonstrates his characteristic approach to the good life in a style that stands out in the Confucian tradition.

### Friendship in Confucian paradigms of life

In all kinds of earlier normative ethics, how to make friends and how to guide an individual in choosing right people as close associates are one of the central concerns for living well and acting appropriately. Friendship is seen both as a personal good and as a necessary ingredient of the public life, and is often designated as part of the ethical paradigm on the good life. For example, 'it was central to Aristotle's conception of the good life that it should consist in pleasant and beneficial activity directed towards friends' (Grayling 2013: 6). Aristotle devotes one chapter of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to 'The Kinds of Friendship', and claims that 'friendship is a necessity' because 'Nobody would choose to live without friends even if he had all the other good things.' (Aristotle 1976: 258)

Similarly, conversations concerning friendship are abundant in early Confucian texts, in which the characters that are used to refer to friends or friendship are *you* 友 or *peng* 朋 or the combination of the two, *peng you* 朋友. In most cases, 'you' is used alone to refer to what is meant by 'friend(s)' or 'friendship' in pre-Qin texts, but the character '*peng*' or the phrase '*peng you*' are occasionally also used to refer to the same thing as 'you', which can be seen from the *Analects of Confucius*, where *peng you* or *peng* is used nine times, while in *Mencius* it is seen on three occasions and in *Xunzi* the cases are five. Although *peng* and *you* in contemporary Chinese language are used together as one term, in early Confucian texts these two characters are mostly used separately, and the difference between *peng* and *you* has been noted that the former is more associated

with one's (political) companions or alliances in social and academic life while the latter is more concerned with the mutual attraction and appreciation between two (moral) persons who share the same commitment to the Way (*dao* 道).<sup>1</sup>

Comparatively speaking, *you* is more frequently used to refer to friends or friendship in a general sense, and is one of the most important ethical concepts in early Confucian texts. For example, it appears 27 times in the *Analects of Confucius*, and in *Mencius* it is used in 35 contexts.<sup>2</sup> In the extant text of *Xunzi* (fl. 298-238 BCE) which was not fixed up till the time of Liu Xiang (劉向 77-6 BCE) (*Xunzi* 2014: xviii), *you* is applied to various situations on 34 occasions. More importantly than the frequencies of the character used in classical texts is the fact that all early Confucian masters locate friendship in the centre of their discussions on how to lead a virtuous life.

In the *Analects*, it is recorded that among the three counts on which Zengzi 曾子, one of Confucius' disciples, examines himself every day, one is whether or not he is trustful when dealing with friends (Confucius 1979: 59); Zi Xia 子夏, another disciple of Confucius (551-479 BCE), restates that an educated person is trustworthy in dealing with their friends (Confucius 1979: 60). Although there were already a number of cases recorded in earlier Chinese texts in which people highlighted 'trustfulness' or 'faithfulness' (*xin* 信) as the virtue governing people's intercourse with friends, it was Mencius (371?-289? BCE) who first made this point unambiguously by grouping it with the other four cardinal virtues ('affection' (*ai* 愛) between father and son, 'duty' (*yi* 義) between ruler and subject, 'distinction' (*bie* 別) between husband and wife, and 'precedence' (*xu* 序) between elder and younger brothers). These five formed the so-called 'five constant virtues' (*wu chang* 五常) (Mencius 1970: 102) that became part of the Confucian core teachings, guiding the Chinese life for thousands of years.

Friendship is an important part of the Confucian paradigm on the good life. The Confucian good life is defined as a three-dimensional organic process of becoming fully human, which respectively are 'joy', 'wisdom' and 'virtue' (Yao 2018: 222). In all the three dimensions, friendship plays an irreplaceable role and makes a remarkable contribution to the formation of one's good character. Confucian masters noted that in actual life, a joyful thing could easily be turned into the source of distress if we did not cultivate friendship in the right way. Examining the Confucian paradigm, we can find that it is to promote and enhance friendship through wisdom and virtue rather than through material gains or physical pleasures. As far as the importance of wisdom for friendship is concerned, Confucians and ancient Greek philosophers share something in common. As we can read in Plato's dialogue *Lysis* (210 d), Socrates points out that 'if you become wise, my boy, then everybody will be your friend, everybody will feel close to you, because you will be useful and good. If you don't become wise, though, nobody will be your friend, not even your father or mother or your close relatives' (Plato 1997: 694).

There is no doubt that in the texts of Confucius and Mencius friendship is an important topic and occupies an unalienable position in discourses on the order of

<sup>1</sup>Originally a pictograph of linked shells as units of the currency, *peng* was later used to refer to the people who studied together: 'the people of the same school are called "*peng*", while the people of the same aspiration and commitment are called "*you*" (同門曰朋, 同志曰友)' (Hanyu da zidian 1993: 859).

<sup>2</sup>Among these usages, there are five cases where it is used as part of a person's name (*ran you* 然友) and does not reflect what we mean by 'friendship' or does not have an independent sense of being friendly.

human society and on how one could become fully humane (*ren* 仁, often translated as 'benevolent'). Xunzi follows suit but further argues for the necessity of friendship in observing ritual (*li* 禮, also translated as 'ritual propriety' or 'ritual-rites') and living through the whole human life. Admitting that faithfulness to friends is a constituent element of ritual propriety, Xunzi adopts quite unique ways to justify friendship for leading a good life and to empower its position in the process of human becoming. His justifications are differentiable, one way or another, from those made by Confucius and Mencius. To put it simply, Xunzi's understanding of friendship is embedded in, and derived from, the three fundamentals he has established systematically in ethical deliberations. Indeed, the importance of friends or friendship in Xunzi cannot be fully appreciated unless we see it in the context of his theoretical reconstruction of the 'traditional' Confucian views on human nature, on the role and position of teachers, and on the way of how human community functions well. All the three perspectives are closely related to his main discourse on ritual propriety and constitute a distinctive ethics of friendship.

### Friends and human nature

Instead of simply stating that humans are the same or similar by nature but are differentiated from one another in practices as made by Confucius, or asserting that humans are born with an innately good nature which is then spoiled or corrupted by unrighteous cultural and political forces and due to the agents' indifference as claimed by Mencius, Xunzi formulates a different kind of argument concerning human nature in which he reconfirms the necessity of friendship for living a good life.

For Xunzi, the inborn dispositions and inclinations are what is called 'nature' (*xing* 性) while the goodness of virtuous behaviour and righteous thoughts is nothing but the result of the 'deliberate effort' or 'conscious activity' (*wei* 偽). These are two opposite sides of being a human: 'Human nature is evil; its goodness derives from conscious activity' (de Bary and Bloom 1999: 179). 'Evil' (e 惡) in this context is not the same as the 'original sin' in the Christian doctrine; it results from the consequence of an inborn tendency towards self-satisfaction which without being rectified or restrained would necessarily cause social disorder and chaos. In the words of Xunzi, humans are born with desires or dispositions for self-satisfaction and self-profiting. If they were allowed to indulge these passions, it would surely lead to nothing but 'competition and strife, causing one to rebel against one's proper duty, reduce principle to chaos, and revert to violence' (de Bary & Bloom 1999: 180).

Xunzi is thus convinced that the inborn nature causes the decline of virtues, leads to disorder, and damages one's relation to other people. Since untransformed human beings are first to meet their own needs and to take care of their own interests, they would have disregarded all social and moral responsibilities, were they allowed to follow their inborn nature: 'When one has a wife and son, then one's filial piety to one's parents declines. When one's appetites and desires are fulfilled, then one's faithfulness to friends declines' (Xunzi 2014: 255). To secure such virtues as filial piety to parents, duties to the state, and faithfulness to friends, Xunzi argues, we must engage in 'conscious activity' to overcome or restrict 'most unlovely' (*shen bu mei* 甚不美) 'inborn dispositions' (*ren qing* 人情). In transforming the naturally selfish emotions and dispositions, humans are in urgent need of ritual guidance. Xunzi claims specifically that

the system of rituals (*li* 禮) were instituted by the sage (*sheng* 聖) or former kings (*xian wang* 先王) who, disliking chaos and disorder, designed a wide range of ritual-propriety codes to curb people's self-centred dispositions. Ritual is to guide people not only in social life but also in their personal life. Funeral ritual, for example, is explained as that 'which takes care to order living and dying. Birth is the beginning of people, and death is the end of people. When the beginning and end are both good, then the human way is complete,' and in the funeral of a common person, the ritual requires the gathering together of 'his family and friends', to show their care about and respect for the person deceased (Xunzi 2014: 207).

The necessity of friendship is seen in its function to help us correct or guide the inborn tendencies. Asked about what is meant by being a ruler, a minister, a father, a son, elder and younger brothers, husband and wife, Xunzi comes to answer these questions by explaining how one should do to fulfil one's responsibilities, and has implicitly added 'friendship' to the list of moral responsibilities. In the case of elder brother's duties and virtues, for example, Xunzi makes it clear that the way to be an elder brother is to be 'compassionate, loving, and display friendliness' (Xunzi 2014: 119). This means that friendship is derived from brotherhood and is therefore embedded in the family relations. Placing real friends in the same rank of one's own family members, Xunzi would not agree that friends are fungible, whatever happened to them. This point is clarified by Chenyang Li who argues that, in a Confucian context, 'true friends are like family members and family members are not fungible', and who quotes as the evidence 'an etymological study demonstrating that the original Chinese word for friend, *you* 友, means "loving brother(hood)" and that calling someone a *you* is to recognize the individual as a good member of one's family or quasi-family' (Li 2019: 495).<sup>3</sup> It is indeed true that in a Xunzian context, friends are in many respects closely associated with family members, are adding forces to bringing inborn tendencies under control, and help establishing one's virtues. Because the family is most heavily guided by ritual-propriety, then the relationship between friends must also be subject to the regulation of ritual-propriety. Nonetheless, there is a difference between family members and friends in terms of how they could help us overcome inborn dispositions and cultivate good behaviour tendencies.

As far as friends are needed for securing a good life is concerned, Xunzi does not divert at all from Confucius' teaching. He quotes a conversation recorded in the *Analects* to justify the necessity of friends beyond family connections: 'Even if a man has the strength of a tout warrior of state, he cannot lift his own body. This is not due to any lack of strength; it is the force of circumstances that makes it impossible. Hence, if when he comes home his conduct is not disciplined, then he is himself at fault; if when he is in public, his reputation is not proclaimed, it is the transgression of his friends. It is for this reason that when the gentleman comes home, he is sincere in conduct, and when he goes out, he befriends worthy men. How then could he not have a reputation for filial conduct?' (Knoblock 1999: 951) From this quotation we can reason that for Xunzi family members and friends function differently and help us in different ways to be good and virtuous. We would expect the former to help us overcome

<sup>3</sup>Aristotle also associates friends to the members of the family and likens friendship to the close tie of between members in a social community. For example, 'Friendship between brothers is like that which unites the members of a social club' (Aristotle 1976: 277).

immoral motives and behaviours within the household, while counting on the latter's assistance to maintain virtuous reputation when we are engaged in social and political activities.

### Friends and teachers

According to Xunzi, 'the sage transforms his nature and establishes deliberate effort. In establishing deliberate efforts, he produces ritual and *yi*. In producing ritual and *yi* he institutes proper models and measures' (Xunzi 2014: 251).<sup>4</sup> For ordinary people they must also transform their nature and establish their 'deliberate effort'. In the process of moral cultivation, they are expected to follow righteous models and to observe proper measures. The models and measures in question are to be found in the figure and activity of teachers. This is why 'learning' or education is taken by Xunzi as the first priority in transforming human nature and establishing good social order, and why Xunzi takes masters or teachers (*shi* 師) as the models for all sorts of people, and regards them as the source of moral teachings and the guarantee for the success of the educational project on ritual and morality. It is in the context of making people good through learning that we have found not only the elevated position of friendship but also the role friends are expected to play in leading a good life.

The extant text of Xunzi starts with the chapter of 'Exhortations to Learning' (*quan xue* 勸學), which lays down the foundation of the whole and systematic discourse on transforming human nature and setting up deliberate activities (*huaxing qiwei* 化性起偽). The role of teachers is presupposed by the necessity of transforming human nature. According to Xunzi, 'one must be transformed by the example of a teacher and guided by the way of ritual and rightness before one will attain modesty and yielding, accord with refinement and ritual, and return to order' (de Bary and Bloom 1999: 180). In this system, teachers enjoy an especially high position because it is through teachers that the sagely teachings could be passed on to ordinary people, by which humans who have an originally bad nature are able to learn how to be truly human and how to behave humanely. In one word, by associating 'friends' with teachers Xunzi stresses the necessity of friendship in one's moral transformation.

On three occasions in the text, Xunzi places 'friends' side by side with 'teachers'. In Chapter 2 on 'Cultivating Oneself', he rejects the proposition that education and friendship are simply taken as a means to commend us; instead, he argues that friends are not only a mirror to reflect the goodness in our behaviour but also an effective measure to encourage us to be good and to correct our wrongs: 'those who have good reason to find fault with me are my teachers; those who have good reason to find me praiseworthy are my friends; and those who flatter me do me injury' (de Bary and Bloom 1999: 165). In the same chapter when talking about the right measures in regulating *qi* (氣 the vital power) and the proper way in cultivating *xin* (心 the heart-mind), Xunzi confirms that in both situations we must seek help from teachers and friends together: 'What has become ordinary, common, enervated, and unfocused, [we must]

<sup>4</sup>*Yi* 義 in the quotation is of a multidimensional meaning and reference, pointing to the internal moral sense or conscience, as well as the external qualities, codes and behaviour. It has been therefore translated respectively as 'righteousness' (James Legge), 'morality' (Wing-tsit Chan), 'rightness' (de Bary and Bloom), 'moral principles' (John Knoblock) etc. Eric Hutton simply transliterates it here as 'yi'.

relieve with the help of teachers and friends' (de Bary and Bloom 1999: 165). In Chapter 23, Xunzi puts forward that following teachers and friends is one of the ways by which all sorts of people can learn how to be good and how to become a true gentleman: 'even if they had a fine nature and inborn substance and their hearts were keenly discriminating and wise, they would still need to seek worthy teachers to serve, and choose worthy friends to befriend'; the reason for this is simple: we can hear the ways of the ancient sages from a worthy teacher, just as we can see in a worthy friend the conduct that is loyal, trustworthy, respectful, and deferential (Xunzi 2014: 257). From this we can logically induce that for Xunzi friends are as important as teachers, and they are actually in the same category in terms of helping us overcome the bad nature, rectify wrong dispositions and lead a good and virtuous life.

Because of the same or similar roles 'teachers' and 'friends' are believed to play for one's becoming a true gentleman, by associating friends with 'teachers', Xunzi maximizes the nobility and goodness of friendship. It is therefore no surprise that 'exalting or esteeming teachers' (*long shi* 隆師) and 'loving friends' (*qin you* 親友) are seen as the foundation on which one can complete one's own transformation (Xunzi 2014: 9).

Xunzi's way to elevating the position of friendship in the good life is in line with his predecessors in the Confucian tradition. There is a close link between friendship, learning and self-cultivation in the *Analecets* which can be seen from the fact that the whole text starts with three rhetorical questions concerning what a gentleman is like: 'Is it not a pleasure to learn and to practise from time to time what has been learned? Is it not delightful to have friends come from afar? Is it not a superior man if he does not feel hurt even though he is not recognized?' (Chan 1963: 18). These three questions are concerned with three most important aspects of being a morally good person. The first is concerned with teaching and learning, the second with friendship, and the third with the interaction between one and others. This textual evidence shows that in Confucius friendship is in close association to, or in parallel with, learning, which, as demonstrated above, has prepared Xunzi for his way to justify friendship *en route* the noble and superior position of teachers. By associating friends with teachers, Xunzi reconfirms that the relation between friends is among the most important human relations and that friendship is the necessary part of a good life.

The association of friends with teachers has not only enhanced the position of friendship in the 'hierarchical' moral and social structure but has also pointed at the possibility of one's gaining 'moral benefits' from friends. The prime role teachers play is to teach or guide or influence a younger or less cultivated person in his/her social and moral life. Although friends are most likely to be of the same generation as one is, worthy friends are expected to be the source of moral powers to drive and encourage one's moral cultivation, or to be the moral model for one to follow.

By putting friends and teachers together, Xunzi takes friends as an important assistance for improving our moral character. This implies that friends we hold dearly might have been taken by Xunzi as the 'means' in order to maintain or enhance our own ethical esteem. This is involved in the controversies and discussions of why we should have friends – whether or not friendship is of intrinsic value or it is simply instrumental to a specific end, however noble this end might be. To appreciate the importance of this question, we may find an illustration in one of the earliest cases for the so-called dualism between the intrinsic and the acquired values of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where many people are supposed to claim that it is ethically

right to have friends because from friendship we can gain pleasure, utility or virtue. On the one hand, Aristotle himself seems to disregard friendship that is based on pleasure and interest and praises the one that is based on virtue, and does not take these three as being on the same level. On the other hand, Aristotle makes it clear that the best friendship lies in the fact that it is not instrumental to a further end. (Aristotle 1976: 262-3)

Should we have a friend because of who he is or because he could be useful or helpful to our own advantage? The implications of Xunzi's discourse on friendship can lead us in either of these two directions. On the one hand, it seems clear that Xunzi does not think of any intrinsic value that friends hold, as he places an emphasis on the help and support from friends.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, as the help and support which friends are expected to give are in most cases referred to moral influence and ethical guidance, it seems that Xunzi does not simply presume that friends should be taken as the means for our own end. The secret of combining these two sides lies in his association of friendship, not with material or social gains, but with 'learning and practicing' by paralleling friends and teachers. Since teaching and learning are mutually dependent, and 'teacher' and 'student' are often mutually dependent in earlier Confucian texts, friends' influence can also be a two-way traffic. Although 'xue' in Xunzi has a much wider range of subjects to study than that in the contexts of Confucius and Mencius, it is nonetheless primarily concerned with one's moral knowledge and character cultivation. Thus, friendship has not only entailed mutually engaging moral reflections but also can motivate a strong desire to learn from each other. Xunzi points out that when encountering right friends, one would naturally enact the righteousness of following ritual propriety and being restraint and deferent: 'When he meets a friend, he devotes himself to showing the appropriate courtesies and rules, polite refusals, and yielding precedence' (Knock 1999: 135).

Because friends are necessary in our moral cultivation and behaviour, Xunzi takes it seriously what kind of people we should treat as our friends. A friend is a friend because he acts as a positive stimulus for us to engage in self-cultivation, while those who have negative implications for our cultivation, however pleasing they may be, must be kept away from us. It is one of the important issues for Xunzi, therefore, to provide a justified criterion for selecting the right people as friends, which is seen by Xunzi as part of the foundation for cultivating virtues: 'A lord of men must choose his ministers carefully, and a commoner must choose his friends carefully' (Xunzi 2014: 313). By choosing right people as friends will one be able to strengthen one's ethical commitment to the Way (*dao* 道) and virtue, and to reach a higher level of moral cultivation.

It is a consistent theme in Confucian discourses that in order to benefit, morally, from friendship, we must carefully choose our companions, who must be morally good or be more advanced in self-cultivation. The reason why Confucius commands his students to 'make friends with the most benevolent gentlemen in a state' (Confucius 1979: 133) is that they would benefit from the virtuous influence of the latter. Confucius goes

<sup>5</sup>You in Xunzi is both a noun and a verb. As a verb, it means 'be friendly to', 'befriend', 'treat somebody friendly' or 'make somebody as one's friend', as we can see that Xunzi talks about 'He who can make the feudal lords his friends is a hegemon', and if a hegemon 'cultivates a way of befriending his rivals, and treats the feudal lords with reverence, then the feudal lords will delight in him' (Xunzi 2014: 71-72). In these cases, 'friendship' is clearly taken as the means to the end a hegemon would like to achieve.



further to differentiate good friendship from bad ‘friendship’: ‘There are three kinds of friendship which are beneficial and three kinds which are harmful. Friendship with the upright, with the truthful, and with the well-informed is beneficial. Friendship with those who flatter, with those who are meek and who compromise with principles, and with those who talk cleverly is harmful’ (Chan 1963: 45). The same is also true for Xunzi who teaches that when making friends, we must not rely on any perception of taking material and social advantages from them; rather, the only consideration we should have is how much friendship can benefit cultivating our virtues.

### Friendship and the communal life

Apart from the justification of friendship by the necessity of transforming human nature and by associating the function of friends with that of teachers, Xunzi takes yet another perspective on friendship from his speculations on why and how human communities came into existence. It seems to be a plain fact that despite not as strong as oxen in terms of physical strength, nor as fast as horses in terms of running, humans can have oxen and horses used to assist them. How is this so? To this question, Xunzi answers as follows: ‘it is because humans are able to form communities while animals cannot. Why are humans able to form communities? I say it is because of social divisions’ (Xunzi 2014: 76). In order to overcome unbridled forces both internal and external, and to make a good use of available resources, humans must form communities (*qun* 群) among themselves. In order to form communities, they must divide themselves into different classes and groups (*fen* 分). However, a bigger question arises: How can divided communities be harmonized, or, in other words, how can they perform proper functions without conflicts and clashes which would lead to chaos and disorder? For Xunzi the sole reason for, or the sole means of, maintaining human communities lies in the binding and transforming power of ritual and moral principles (*yi* 義), which leads him to assert that ‘it is unacceptable to neglect ritual and moral principles even for the shortest moment’ (Knoblock 1999: 239). Not only can ritual and morality restrain the inborn dispositions and tendencies of human beings but they can also get people to work together in the right way. It is ritual and morality that makes it possible for humans to form communities and to divide into different social groups appropriately. To ensure humans to live peacefully without falling into the so-called ‘natural state’ where ‘all are against all’ in competition, to borrow the famous sayings from Thomas Hobbs (Hobbs 1985), it is necessary not only for ritual and morality to be observed but also for good friendship to be cultivated. Therefore, Xunzi calls us to be associated with the right people and to make worthy friends in order to offset the negative effects of the inborn contentious nature and to ensure human flourishing.

This way, the necessity of community and social division renders the third type of ethical justification for friendship. Xunzi is not the first person to highlight the importance of choosing the right people as friends in the Confucian tradition. As explained above, how to keep a distance from the fool and the unworthy, and how to befriend the wise and the good have been not only an important part of Confucian wisdom but also one of the key factors necessary for the good life. The questions concerning the criterion by which we choose our friends have always come to the fore in Confucian discourses. However, it is Xunzi who first discusses the necessity of friendship from the perspective of human communities and places an emphasis on the mutual benefits

true friendship is believed to generate. In Xunzi, friendship depends on whether or not the Way is shared by each other and this leads him to the understanding of friends as a mutually beneficial relation between the people of the same or similar character and at the same or similar level in moral cultivation.

It is worth noting that the Confucian emphasis on the process of mutual influencing between friends is differentiable from that of most Greek discourses. Admitting that friends are necessary for the good life, ancient Greek philosophers tend to define friendship as a state, an activity and as a feeling (Aristotle 1976: 266). Plato, in particular, associates friendship with *philia*, a kind of love that is not dictated by passionate love (*eros*) but is directed to one's companies including but not being confined to friends (Grayling 2013: 6). More and more qualifications such as equality, mutuality, non-fungibility are later added when defining friendship. For example, in Greek philosophy 'mutual utility is a founding principle of friendship', and mutuality in terms of usefulness is the guiding principle. Or more specifically, for the Greeks, 'the usefulness of an individual to another, and to his family and community, is a condition of his being regarded as a friend both to him and to them' (Grayling 2013: 25).

In comparison, Confucian mutuality in friendship is much simpler or more straightforward. The priority in Confucian considerations of friendship is given to the Way that both sides share, as Confucius points out, 'There is no point in people taking counsel together who follow different ways' (Confucius 1979: 137). Keeping in line with this tradition, Xunzi also defines friends as the people who have the same commitment, explaining that friends are those with whom one shares the Way: 'Friendships are how people hold to each other, and if people do not share the same ways, how would they hold to each other?' (Xunzi 2014: 313) In human communities, people of the same ways would gather together as friends, not only to form a joint force in social activities but also for them to reach the same level of moral cultivation through the lifting of the lower to the higher. Since friends are the people who of a similar character gather together, by observing one's friends we can determine what kind of person one is: 'It is evident that things of the same kind naturally come together; hence one reviews a man by looking at his friends. Could there be any doubt about this?' (Knoblock 1999: 915) Xunzi hence comes to the conclusion that 'In choosing friends and deeming people to be good, one must be careful, for this is the foundation of virtue' (Xunzi 2014: 313).

Due to complicated relations in human communities, it is not easy to have sustainable friendships. In the text of Xunzi, Confucius' conversation with Zigong (子貢), one of his disciples, is quoted to explain how difficult it is to carry on friendship, and why is so. In this conversation, Confucius told Zigong that serving a lord or dealing with the wife is difficult, and Zigong responds that he then 'would like to rest with' friends. Confucius continues, by quoting from the *Book of Poetry*, to explain how a friend can be properly assisted: 'Your friends are assisted, assisted by your dignified demeanor,' and remonstrates Zigong that 'Dealing with friends is difficult; how could you expect to rest with them!' (Knoblock 1999: 909) The difficulty comes not only from the mutual demands by friends but more from the perception of human community. Friends are not there to be in total accord with or to praise oneself. Rather they are expected to correct or challenge one's way of doing things and to criticize one's wrong decision or poor choices. In the same way as the filial piety is not simply to follow one's parents, Xunzi opposes the opinion that friendship is simply to please. For him, the value of friendship

is in that a good friend helps us follow the right course of life, not deriving from the Way, and not making serious mistakes. In the mouth of Confucius Xunzi propagates that ‘When a father had a remonstrating son, then nothing in his conduct lacked ritual principles. When a knight had remonstrating friends, he did not act against requirements of morality’ (Knoblock 1999: 949). This conversation reveals that Xunzi does not approve the one-way loyalty to the ruler by the subject or one-way filial obeying to the father by the son, which is in contrast to the propagation of one-way responsibilities made in the name of Confucianism in the later history of China. For Xunzi, what is crucial for friendship is not to please the one side but to ensure each other to follow the Way consistently and to cultivate virtues diligently.

Friends are part of human communities, and it is important to maintain trust between friends, because without trustfulness people would easily lose confidence in one another, converting the mutual beneficial relationship to a mutually hurting relation. Being consistent with Confucius and Mencius, Xunzi notices the importance of trustfulness as one of the cardinal virtues. However, by exalting trustfulness to a higher position, Xunzi went further to highlight the auxiliary function of friendship for the good order of human communities. In the Confucian tradition, trustfulness is closely related to another virtue and forms a pair of virtues ‘loyalty and trustfulness’ (*zhong xin* 忠信).<sup>6</sup> This pair in Xunzi appears 27 times, in comparison with the 7 times in the *Analects* and 4 times in Mencius. The combination of the two virtues has many implications for Xunzi’s views on friendship. First, friendship is formed in human communities and can be maintained only through establishing the good order in society; second, the private and the public are both related and differentiated in Confucian discourses on friendship, as the virtues demonstrated in the relationships between persons and virtues in communal life are always taken as interdependent; third, the increasing frequency of cases to combine ‘loyalty’ and ‘trustfulness’ from Confucius to Xunzi points in a new orientation in which Xunzi takes the lead to placing more and more emphases on the public functions of friendship.

By associating the virtue governing the relations between friends to the ‘loyalty’ that is directed to public matters, Xunzi continues the Confucian tradition in treating friendship as something important within the personal sphere, while his endorsement of friendship as the adhesive to maintain a good community life is not yet fully expanded. This may be seen clearly when we compare Xunzi with Aristotle who associates friendship not with ‘loyalty’ but with ‘justice’, and places justice above friendship. For Aristotle, justice exists in all spheres, both personal and public. While in Xunzi the differentiation of ‘trustfulness’ as the virtue governing friends from ‘loyalty’ as the virtue governing community can be detected, Aristotle argues beyond any doubt

<sup>6</sup>Although in the late part of Chinese history, ‘*zhong*’ was primarily referred to as ‘political loyalty’ to the ruler or the Emperor, early Confucians mainly used it as an ethical term, containing the meanings from internally being ‘loyal’ to one’s self, ‘faithful’ to one’s own nature or ‘sincere’ in one’s own heart-mind, to externally doing ‘the best for others’, or ‘devoting one fully to the things we have undertaken’. Even being used in a political sense, it is normally meant a reciprocal rather than the one way directed relation. In the *Analects* we can see this clearly from the following passages that ‘A ruler should employ his ministers according to the principle of propriety [*li*], and ministers should serve their ruler with loyalty [*zhong*]’ and that ‘Fan Chi asked about humanity. Confucius said, “Be respectful in private life [*gong* 恭], be serious (*jing* 敬) in handling affairs, and be loyal [*zhong* 忠] in dealing with others”’ (Chan 1963: 20, 41). Xunzi has obviously applied Confucius’ view on the virtue of ‘loyalty’ to his justification of friendship.

that justice functions both in communal relations and in the relations between friends, or more precisely that 'justice' supervises both personal and public life, and friendship must be subjected to communal relations: 'the claims of justice should increase with the intensity of friendship' (Aristotle 1976: 273). While Xunzi attempts to develop Confucian friendship from a personal relation to a public virtue and to justify friendship from its function in meeting the needs of community life, he remains to confine friendship virtue to the personal sphere. In contrast, Aristotle designates friendship a role to play in the public life and subjects it to the regulation of justice as the virtue governing both personal matters and public relations. This might reveal to us one of the key differences between the Chinese understanding of friends and the Greek views on friendship.

### Concluding remarks

At the beginning of this article, we have stated that friendship is central to all types of traditional normative ethics. This would naturally raise a question of why we should have a friend, and this question is to require an ethical justification for friendship. We have contextualised Xunzi's answer to this question in the Confucian tradition and confirmed that Xunzi follows, to a great extent, the teachings on friendship by Confucius and shows consistency with Mencius, but this does not diminish the special contribution Xunzi made to the Confucian philosophy of friendship. The characteristic features Xunzi demonstrates in his treatment of the topic are to be found in his general theories on human nature, on learning and education, and on the nature and function of human community. We have subsequently examined Xunzi's arguments that friendship is justified because it is necessary to help humans to overcome the inborn tendencies towards competition and strife so much so that social chaos and disorder can be avoided or corrected, that friendship is justified since it is supplementary to learning and education, and worthy friends are equivalent to teachers in terms of moral influences and exemplary models, and that friendship is justified as it is needed for the good order of human communities, which are formed in order for humans to master natural and domestic forces for their own advantages. All these three ethical justifications together constitute Xunzian perspectives on friendship, which are not only divergent from the Greek views but also differentiable, one way or another, from those proposed by Confucius and Mencius.

Despite being suppressed and neglected for the most part of Chinese history in the past, Xunzi's theory has increasingly attracted attention among contemporary scholars, some of whom have even included the text in the so-called 'New Four Books' (Liang 2020). In the same vein, by highlighting the necessity of friends for overcoming our ego-centric tendency and placing an emphasis on friendship as formatting, and contributing to, a sound communal life, Xunzi's justifications of friendship have become more and more relevant to the modern world. While his high standards in terms of ethics may prove hard to follow for contemporary Chinese people in particular and human beings in general who are, to various degrees, under the yoke of self-indulgence as shown in the fake/virtual friendships *via* virtue technologies or self-media, Xunzi may nevertheless be taken as a guide, or a 'teacher' as he says, not only because he provides us with a kind of *vade mecum* very useful to maintaining interdependent relations in the times of globalisation and de-globalisation but also because he conceives

of friendship as a key factor to overcome bad influences, to improve our characters and to strengthen human communities. This further proves that his ethical justifications of friendship are not only relevant to us but also are still an invaluable resource for us to explore in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Acknowledgments.** This article is supported by the MoE project of Key Research Institutes for Humanities and Social Sciences at Universities, entitled ‘Studies of Traditional Chinese Culture and the Common Values Shared by Humankind’ (23JJD720003) and by fund for building world-class universities (disciplines) of Renmin University of China (Project No. KYGJD2023003).

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**Cite this article:** Yao X (2024). Ethical Justifications of Friendship in Xunzian Perspectives. *Diogenes* 65(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0392192123000056>