

1. "Nature" and "Heaven"



Xun Qing (305?–225? B.C.), also called Kuang but most often Xunzi, an avowed follower of Confucius, was without doubt one of the greatest of early Chinese philosophers. Whether he was “the moulder of ancient Confucianism”¹ or worthy to be called “the Chinese Aristotle” has been disputed, but his stature is unquestioned even by those who consider him a maverick among Confucians. Liu Wu-chi calls him “a prose master, a profound thinker,”² and one of my former colleagues, a classmate of Hu Shih and a longtime teacher of Chinese philosophy, was fond of saying, “Xunzi is the only classical Chinese philosopher who consistently talks sense.”³ Though Xunzi suffered a long, though only partial, eclipse, the twentieth century has seen increasing interest in his work, with detailed and acute analysis being given to his ethical argumentation, his theories of language, his treatment of ritual, and other topics.⁴

Despite this interest, there has been little challenge to the traditional interpretation of one of his most interesting and oft-quoted essays, *Tian lun*, appearing in Watson’s translation as *A discussion of Heaven* but titled by Knoblock *Discourse on Nature*.⁵ The word *Tian* has been long translated in the West as “Heaven,” a translation requiring qualification and interpretation, but one that has proved useful—perhaps because few in the West would confuse what the Chinese were talking about with some popular uses of “heaven.” “Heaven” has become useful primarily because no more suitable alternative word has been found.

“Nature,” however, is a word with a long history of uses and a wide range of meanings in the West (Baldwin’s *Dictionary of Philosophy* gives 37 meanings for the word⁶), and one may well doubt that it corresponds closely enough to any Chinese word to be a really useful translation. For instance, in the West “nature,” the realm of “the natural,” has been defined over against “the supernatural,” “the unnatural,” “the artificial,”

and it is doubtful that Chinese ideas of any of these opposites to “nature” are congruent to ours. Nature is spoken of as including humans and as excluding them; as being their enemy and as being their friend, even their “Mother.” Above all, “nature” has become, over the last three centuries, something mechanical, value-free, and exploitable for any ends we wish to bend it to—while still being seen as spontaneous, creative, beautiful, dangerous, and sometimes healing.

These lexicographic inconveniences of the translator are not, however, the root of the problem, for translators draw on a tradition of understanding *Tian*, especially in uses of the kind found in Xun’s *Tian lun*, in a way that invited the translation “Nature.” This tradition goes back at least to the Daoism of Guo Xiang in the fourth century A.D., which had roots in the rejection of Confucianism of the late Han and its view of *Tian*. This Daoism penetrated Confucianism over the centuries, and was drawn upon by the Sung neo-Confucian efforts of 900 years ago to set Confucianism firmly over against Buddhism and Daoist religion, and in so doing to provide a solid foundation for moral and political life. Their view of *Tian* was as indebted to Guo Xiang as it was to Han Confucianism. Its function as the complement of humanity, in a polarity that was not a duality, gave *Tian* a character for which we, perhaps, have no better word than “Nature,” although even in that case it needs careful explanation. There is much room for doubt, however, that Xun Qing held a neo-Confucian, a post-Han, or even a late-Han idea of *Tian*.

The central problem of this book has been pointed out in the Foreword: Just how should Xun Qing’s understanding of *Tian*, particularly as presented in the *Tian lun*, be reconstructed and articulated? Is there indeed the preponderance of evidence for the generally received view that its widespread acceptance would suggest? Does the essay, and the corpus as a whole, allow some alternative construction?

In the Preface we said:

Search for such a preponderance of evidence seemed instead to show that what existed was but a somewhat tenuous tradition of interpretation, going back in some respects at least 1100 years and drawing on opinions still older, but not in any traceable, direct line back to Xun Qing or his students.

This tenuous tradition of interpretation, as far as the *Tian lun* is concerned, became notably robust with the impact of interest in science in the twentieth century.

Although Chinese philosophizing is traced back to Confucius, one can say that the "history of Chinese philosophy" is a twentieth-century development, just as the West's parochial "history of philosophy" was a nineteenth-century one. The Chinese knew their philosophizing went back to Confucius or "Laozi," but although their textual studies were well aware of the passage of the centuries, their method of commentary was not conducive to historical study in the Western sense. Past Chinese thinkers, in general, tended to be evaluated, even interpreted, in terms of the authorities accepted at the time, whether scholarly or political. (There is some ground for saying that the same pattern has continued under the Marxist regimes of mainland China, although Marxist authorities are always, in their own quasi-Westernized terms, "historical.")

The development of the history of Chinese philosophy coincided rather closely with the modernization of China, and some of the emphases that emerged were seriously affected by the enthusiasms and conflicts of ideas that accompanied the downfall of the old regime and the struggles entailed by attempts to discern what the new institutions and standards would be. Those, like Kang You-wei, who would retain the old philosophical heroes, sought new interpretations that would enable old customs to be revised. Some who would reject the old guides outright turned to the West, to Haeckel and Russell, or to Bergson, Eucken, or Dewey, and many eventually to Marx. Others, more interested in maintaining confidence in their own ancient culture, manifested a burgeoning interest in such figures as Modi, Xunzi, and even the Logicians and Legalists.

From this last trend resulted interest not only in these figures, but in seeing what they might contribute to the modernization of Chinese thinking. The nineteenth-century project of borrowing from the West the "function" of Western science and technology without importing its "substance" had failed. Was there something substantially scientific in the long tradition of Chinese philosophic thought? Any materials that could be used in this quest were welcome.

Modi's "universal love" sounded like a Chinese version of the substance of Christianity (always identified with the West in China) and his "benefiting all" like a version of utilitarianism. His epistemology, suitably reinterpreted, could be quoted to indigenize scientific method ideologically. But one other ancient figure was enthusiastically embraced as a Western-style philosopher of Nature: Xunzi (much as some enthusiasts in the West's recently emerging ecology movement once embraced Laozi). Tu Wei-ming writes,

Scholars since Liang Ch'i-ch'ao have been impelled by a sense of cultural urgency to look for Western-like values in the body of traditional ideas. Their search was concentrated mostly in the ancient period. The technological ingenuity of Mo Ti, the art of logic of Kung-sun Lung, the spirit of science in Hsün tzü and Wang Ch'ung, all these and others supported their image of what the new China should be.⁷

Xunzi was not at all unknown to Chinese scholars, or even to the West, but hardly as a philosopher of Nature. Of human nature, certainly, as questions regarding "Kuang's doctrine," that human nature is evil, occurred in Chinese civil-service examinations, as foils for the approved contrary doctrine of Mencius. Except for his deviation from Mencius and some of his ideas on language and ritual, he was held to be of little importance. In the West, in what is perhaps the first history of Chinese philosophy in English, Suzuki's *Brief History of Early Chinese Philosophy*, first published in article form in *The Monist* in 1907-1908 and in book form in 1914, Xun is expounded as a ceremonialist, a pessimist regarding human nature, an ethicist stressing the need for external discipline, and a stylist, with no mention in the text of any idea of Nature. In the notes, Xun is quoted on Heaven and omens, and rather than relating these in any way to natural sciences, Suzuki calls his view of Heaven "prosaic."⁸

As a somewhat Westernized Japanese, Suzuki was not involved in the ideological struggles of early Republican China. The next influential author was deeply so involved. Following Suzuki's book came Hu Shih's *The Development of the Logical Method in Ancient China*, his doctoral dissertation written for Columbia University in 1915-1917. This was written under John Dewey, who was then moving from his instrumentalist stage to his last, more naturalistic one. In his chapters on Xunzi, Hu translates *Tian* sometimes as "Heaven," but also directly as "nature," and the phrase *zhi Tian ming* (which we discuss at length later) as "control her [that is, Nature's] course."⁹ He speaks of Xun's "exaltation of man over nature," but later calls it "exaggerated" to the extent that it "excluded natural science from the realm of philosophy," and criticizes Xun's comment (as he translates it) that, "To neglect man and speculate about Nature/ Is to misunderstand the facts of the universe."

This work was not published in English until a Shanghai issuance in 1928,¹⁰ but in the meantime Hu had published his influential history of Chinese philosophy in Chinese, which he said was "essentially a Chinese version and expansion" of the earlier work.¹¹

Hu was willing to identify *Tian* ("Heaven") with Nature in the *Xun-*

zi, at least in some important passages, and anyone who has studied John Dewey, or known his pupils closely,¹² knows that "Nature" cannot be separated from investigation by scientific method in his thought. Yet Hu was not willing to attribute to Xun a sufficiently "scientific" view of nature. Despite this, the intellectual momentum of the times tended in the direction of such an identification, sometimes manifested tentatively, sometimes with enthusiasm, until it was widely taken for granted that Xun held a view of nature akin to that which lies behind the sciences as they have developed in the West. In fact, as the earliest translator of much of the *Xunzi* into English, H. H. Dubs, put it, "Heaven, according to Hsuntze, is unvarying Law . . . Thus Heaven comes to mean very nearly the same as our popular concept of Nature."¹³ Since Dubs was for many years the only extensive translation of the *Xunzi* into any Western language, his usage became customary, no matter how many explanatory qualifications one might put upon it.

"Nature" and its modern Chinese equivalent, the ancient phrase *ziran*,¹⁴ thus became the standard readings for *Tian* in a number of passages of the *Tian lun*, (though rarely elsewhere¹⁵), and it often carried the overtones of nature as the object of scientific investigation. Thus W-T. Chan, in his valuable *Sourcebook*, comments at the close of the poem in the *Tian lun*, "Nowhere else in the history of Chinese thought is the idea of controlling nature so definite and so strong. It is a pity that this did not lead to a development of natural science."¹⁶ Chan here (and elsewhere in the translation) equates *Tian*, "Sky," formerly the name of the sky god, with Nature, just as Hu had done, and many after him.

There is some apparent justification for such a translation. When Knoblock, in his valuable set of volumes on the *Xunzi*, says flatly, "The term that the Chinese use to refer to Nature is *tian*,"¹⁷ he is guilty of serious overstatement, but is not entirely wrong—particularly as far as neo-Confucianism was concerned. Some (though not all) Chinese-English dictionaries do indeed give "nature" as a translation of *Tian*,¹⁸ and some Chinese dictionaries (though not all) give *ziran*, an ancient Daoist and general modern term for "nature" (in the sense of "all that happens naturally") as one of many quasi synonyms for *Tian*.¹⁹ My student English-Chinese dictionary does not mention *Tian* in its entry for "Nature," though it does appear under "God," "Heaven," and "Sky."²⁰ And a patently Marxist (and hence "scientific") Chinese-English phrase book, with 29 entries for *Tian*, has not one wherein it means "nature," though in five it does mean "natural."²¹ Knoblock's claim would seem to be tendentious, at the least.

That *Tian* is used much as we use "natural" is patent, but may mis-

lead. When we say, "He isn't using what God gave him" instead of, "He's not using his natural gifts," we are hardly saying 'God' is a synonym for 'nature,' though we are relying on a tradition of God's priority to nature. We may even be referring to something we might call someone's individual nature, or, in a more Aristotelian vein, his human nature (which, tradition might say, God gave him). If one looks, for instance, at the 118 examples given under *Tian* in Mathews' dictionary, as "nature. Providence. The Supreme Ruler." only seven using "Heaven and Earth" as an encompassing reality might with some reason be translated as "nature"; whereas of the 45 examples given under *Tian* as "natural" (as opposed to artificial), every one bears the same ambiguity as our "God-given" example.²²

That *Tian*, in other places translated as "sky," "Heaven," even by some as "God," should in this essay often be translated "Nature," may not seem at first too strange to us in the West who recall the Stoics, the *Deus sive natura* of Spinoza, and even Descartes, or the ambivalence of Jefferson's "Nature and Nature's God" in the Declaration of Independence. A little study, however, leads to the conclusion that "God" is not a fit translation of *Tian*, and hence "Heaven" is not, either, since it still either carries echoes of St. Matthew's "Heaven" as a euphemism for "God" (as it did for the early European sinologists who popularized that translation), or it is so bland as to need much further explanation. "The heavens" is, of course, an appropriate near-synonym for "sky," but it is just those occurrences of *Tian* where "sky" is not very useful that raise the problem. That "Nature," too, might be a misleading translation, in the particular passages where its use became widespread, has not been much discussed. We contend it should be.

Therefore, when referring to *Tian* as a Chinese word, we shall use *Tian*; when to its original, physical referent, we shall use "sky" or "the heavens"; otherwise "Tian" will be used, without italics and usually without quotation marks. We hold the word to be vague, rather than ambiguous. That is, its various uses, sometimes quite distinct in our eyes, tend to shade into each other in Archaic Chinese use, rather than clearly excluding one another.²³ This does not mean they are indistinguishable, but that their identification is highly contextual, and one can never assert that any overtone is completely excluded. One cannot assume without careful hermeneutic attention just how narrowly or broadly the term is focused.

Serious work has been done on clarifying the earliest history, various uses and connotations of *Tian*, some of its ritual and religious involvements, and its political significance.²⁴ Typical of the twentieth century, however, is the selection of some occurrences of the term, especially

in the *Tian lun*, as ones that should be unquestionably translated simply as "Nature."

Several paragraphs ago we quoted W-T. Chan's comment equating Tian with nature. Some have gone farther that Chan did. Thus, Chen Ta-tsi writes,

The philosophical thought of the pre-Ch'in period as embodied in Hsüntze's argument concerning the controllability of Heaven . . . was much pregnant with the spirit of the natural sciences. The special treatise in which Hsüntze propounded that man may control Heaven—by Heaven is meant Nature—has come down to us through the centuries; unfortunately, however, this theory of his was not sufficiently emphasized and elaborated by later generations . . . it may be said that back of the fact that natural sciences were not developed in China, the overlooking and neglect by succeeding generations of Hsüntze's argument concerning the controllability of Heaven . . . had an immense, far-reaching effect.²⁵

Here Chen sounds a note typical of much twentieth-century Chinese comment on the history of scientific thought in China and on Xun Qing in particular, a note possibly derivative from Hu Shih, but one whose popularity undoubtedly rested on the interest in Western science that characterized modern China's attempt to gain some appropriate freedom from its past.

This motif has been particularly attractive to scholars in mainland China, who found in Xun's writings an evident reflection of the presumed incipient scientific materialism of proletarian culture. Thus Li De-yong, in an article in *Wen Shi Che*, makes the phrase Hu translated as "control her (Nature's) course" his entrance key to Xun's whole metaphysics, and, in his later book on Xun, explains that the latter's

'Tao' also manifests a sort of scientific approach. So far as reliable knowledge of objective laws is concerned, and the putting of them to use, his philosophical theory of "controlling Nature's course" is in complete accord with science. . . He raised the battle cry, "Control Nature's ways and use them!" . . . He is the only one of the pre-Qin philosophers to have the scientific spirit and to fight actively for a materialistic philosophy. First of all, he presented the ideal of transforming nature. His idea of "controlling Nature's course" not only differed from the Taoists' passive "wu-wei-ism" but also departed from the subjective idealists' blind path of adventurism.²⁶

Since Marxism takes as humans' defining characteristic their 'transformation of the environment,' and since the social history of materialism is a central theme of Marxist scholarship, it is easy to see the grounds for Li's enthusiasm.

The phrase Hu translated as "control Nature's course" has certainly fascinated non-Marxist students of the *Xunzi* also, whether by itself or by setting the tone for the interpretation of the poem in which it occurs. Chen Yuan-te quotes the poem, in his history of ancient Chinese philosophy, under the heading "Man acts to control nature" (*ren wei zhi tian*). Jiang Shang-xian, in his *Xunzi sixiang tixi*, makes out the thrust of the poem to be "Control nature and use it" (*zhi tian yung tian*). In Wei Ri-chun, *Xunzi xueshu*, we find two pages of expansion on the same phrase, which seems to have become more of a slogan than a text to be interpreted.²⁷

Although some of the recent work on the *Xunzi* has been more restrained, the tradition still is dominant. Thus, the latest critical text of the *Xunzi*, that of Li Di-sheng,²⁸ shows many examples of the use of modern Chinese scientific terminology to explicate old terms that are far from synonymous with them, and of a leaning toward interpretations close to modern scientific naturalism. Some of these we shall treat in the commentary.

One cannot take exception to modern China's quest to anchor its modernization somewhere in its own past, and not just in intellectual importations. Every people must reexamine its heritage in each new cultural situation to gain the freedom from the past that the new situation requires; anything else results in ideology and stagnation. When we in the West study China's past, we may not have the same pressure to interpret it in the context of our own cultural needs—or we may. In any case, we are tempted to apply Western labels such as "naturalism" to ancient Chinese thinkers, and in doing so we try to draw them into the ambit of our own past struggles to free ourselves from cultural inheritances we felt to be confining. While our battles are still in progress, we seemingly use such labels in an attempt to make allies out of ancient intellectual warriors, whose own engagements, in their own time, were skirmishes in a quite different war.²⁹ Later, when our particular struggle has subsided, the labels still function as museum cards telling us in which glass case we may find the mummy of so-and-so. In the one case, the label helps us very little to understand the thinker himself. In the other, it prevents him from contributing anything to our understanding of ourselves.

Quotations such as those we have given could be multiplied indefinitely. Mainland Chinese writers have consistently praised *Xunzi* for his

incipient "scientific outlook," regardless of the wide variety of other judgments they have uttered concerning his contribution to social change at the end of the Zhou period.³⁰ In the West, there seems to have emerged in the movement of "comparative philosophy" dating from World War II an orthodoxy that includes and repeats the view that Xun secularized Heaven and naturalized ethics, enabling him to stand for "controlling Nature" in a way suggestive of modern technology. There have been, as one would expect, some important dissenting voices, particularly among Japanese scholars (whose work, unfortunately, I cannot read³¹), and those who would identify Tian (in appropriate contexts) with Nature without going on to claim the parallel to technological thinking.³² Despite this, the general tenor of interpretation seems to accept the nature identification readily, with only slight variation regarding the technological aspect. It is this, apparently, that Eno calls "the consensus view."

It is revealing to consider that this widespread attribution to Xun Qing of a naturalistic theory of nature and a technological inclination, though supported in part by some general beliefs about cultural currents in his time, is based to a large extent on disputable readings of a very few loci, and particularly of one unclear passage in one poem—a poem set in a context emphasizing quite other interests. It is one aim of this study to deal with the fact that the passages need not be interpreted as they have been; that neither Xun's thinking as a whole, the essay most commonly quoted as embodying such a naturalistic vision, nor the poem it contains, clearly support that interpretation; and that a coherent interpretation of Xunzi's philosophy implies that the so-called "technological interest" or "naturalistic view of nature" is somewhat of an intellectual will-o'-the-wisp. Indeed, our intention is to show that his idea of nature and his attitudes toward it are quite different from anything parallel to modern Western culture. Along with this, though logically separable from it, goes an intention to question whether even the sort of attitude toward deity and holy things that characterizes much that calls itself "naturalism" in the West is present in the *Xunzi*.

One may well ask, "If this is typically a twentieth-century view, isn't the corrective already at hand in the earlier Chinese understanding of Xunzi?" The point is well taken. Creel, in his article, "Was Confucius agnostic?" studied commentaries on the *Analects* written from recent times back to the Han dynasty. The first attribution of agnosticism to Confucius he found was dated 1915! (Interestingly enough, one can still find treatments of Confucius as "agnostic.") And though he later remarked, "My more general conclusions in that article require considerable modification," his evidence stands, and he did not abandon his

specific conclusion.³³ Why should not a similar study of Xun yield a satisfactory resolution?

One answer to this question is that although Creel's study did a great deal to show what the Chinese commentatorial tradition had said about Confucius, it did nothing positive toward giving an understanding of how Confucius' religious position should be understood by Westerners—if it can be.

Another answer lies in the apparent attitude of the Chinese scholarly tradition toward Xun Qing. It is a surprising fact about the *Xunzi* that it was, for most of Chinese history, largely bypassed by Chinese thinkers. Until the nineteenth century, few studied him intensively,³⁴ and that century was immersed in text-critical and philological work, rather than philosophic interpretation.³⁵ Creel remarks,

The number of commentaries is significant. Before the Sung dynasty (and probably until the nineteenth century) only one complete commentary on the book of Hsün-tzū had been written, and this not until the T'ang dynasty, so little, apparently, was the scholarly interest which it attracted. On *Mencius*, on the other hand, the Yu Han collection alone lists and quotes from nine pre-Sung commentaries, five from the Later Han dynasty, one from the Chin dynasty, and three from the T'ang dynasty.³⁶

Since commentary was the usual pattern of study, this is significant.

This neglect may have appeared very early. One of his early disciples has left us a plaint in a later addition to Xun's writings:

His virtue was like that of Yao and Yu, but his generation knew it but little. . . . The world did not recognize him. Today the critics likewise do not investigate the facts, but credit only his reputation. The times had changed; what means had his fame of being born?³⁷

Xun was for a time quoted as a stylist, and was drawn upon as an authority on the *Odes*; some of his ideas on language, ritual, and music became so generally accepted that they were held without reference to the distinctive characteristics of his overall thought. In this way his thoughts did have their own sort of lasting influence, which some have overstressed,³⁸ but that influence was so general, and not always distinguishable from that of other schools of Confucianism, that it did not generate much in the way of direct interest in his writings.

This lack of interest in the *Xunzi* appears to continue throughout the Han and beyond. Thus Wang Chong, a bibliophile, scholar, and skeptic

tic, clearly of a critical mind, does not appear even to mention Xun in his best-known work, the *Lun Heng*.³⁹ When he refers to an example of the belief that men are evil, he mentions Sun Wu's *Art of War*; when he speaks against rain sacrifices, he makes no mention of Xunzi.⁴⁰ As already pointed out, though all the recognized classics had commentaries written before the end of the Han, or soon after, there was none, so far as we know, written for the *Xunzi*; Yang Liang, writing in the ninth century A.D., gives no indication of any predecessors—for more than ten centuries!

Material from the times between the Han and the Tang are unfortunately limited, but that was a time when lively minds were fascinated first by Daoism and then Buddhism. Confucian scholarship was moribund. During the Tang revival Xun was quoted, but there is no evidence he was seriously interpreted. We have, for instance, Wei Zheng, who in A.D. 631 quotes some 29 extracts from the *Xunzi*, about one-ninth of the whole, in his extensive *Qunshu zhiyao* (hereafter *QSZY*), a collection of extracts from various works, commissioned by the throne and aimed at the instruction of political officeholders. Devoid of interpretation or comment, its main value for *Xunzi* scholarship today is its confirmation or occasional correction of the text that later appeared in the first known commentary on the *Xunzi*, that of Yang Liang in 818, more than a thousand years after Xun Qing's death.

Since the *Xunzi* was only one of many works, and the early Tang manifested a restrictive government orthodoxy, it seems to have received little study until the more liberal, later Tang times, when Yang Liang complains that the copies of the *Xunzi* were "torn, tattered, with parts missing, and showed mistakes from inaccurate copying"⁴¹—so that "even those who wished to study Hsuntse found him unattractive and difficult and desisted from their study."

He was occasionally referred to, even praised, but was not studied for his own sake. Yang Liang's contemporary, Han Yu, seems typical. He was willing to rate Xun as the second greatest Confucian after Mencius, but considered him to be important because he "selected elements [from Mencius], but without reaching its essential portion," and "discussed it, but without sufficient clarity,"⁴² not because Xun had anything new of value to offer. In that case, one could pass over Xun and simply study Mencius, as scholars apparently largely did. In fact, it would appear that the compliments Han Yu paid to the *Xunzi* were directed at least as much to its style as to its content.

This history of neglect underlines the fact that *there was no reliable tradition of interpretation of Xunzi before the time of Yang Liang, and*

little creative analysis of his thought subsequently. It is evident in Yang's commentary that he had no real predecessors; he quotes the *Liji*, *Shiji*, *Hanshi Waichuan*, *Shu*, *Shi*, etc., but no later authorities. This means that, careful and competent as his textual and lexical work was, when interpreting Xun's ideas, he was working out of his own Tang situation, and, to the extent that subsequent interpreters have based their understanding on his work, they have started with essentially a Tang (or later) understanding of it, not a Zhou one. Since every subsequent commentary has been based on that of Yang (which was, indeed, a very good and helpful commentary), his work has been occasionally corrected in detail and amplified in thought, but not seriously departed from. Not long after his time, a dominant neo-Confucianism determined the way early Chinese philosophers were understood—something that has continued into this century. There was finally a significant collation of the various texts of the *Xunzi* by Xie Yong (1719–1795), and the first attempt at careful explication since Yang Liang by Wang Zhong (1745–1794), early in the remarkable outburst of Ching textual studies. It is only recently that alternative interpretations of the *Xunzi* have appeared, and it is clear that further explorations are needed, even though, with the Zhou data so limited, we are not likely ever to attain an understanding of early Chinese philosophy that is not seriously tainted one way or another.

That the Tang period was not Zhou may be of little importance as far as his political ideas are concerned—and such do make up a large part of the *Xunzi*. But in the areas of cosmology and religion, areas relevant to this essay, it may be crucial. In the late Han and for some time after, Daoism was the intellectual stimulant, rather than Confucianism, and there were important differences between its understanding of what might be called nature and that of Xun. Then, for several centuries before the Tang, the best minds in China had been attracted to Buddhism. This last changed the Chinese mind significantly: it expanded the cosmological imagination tremendously through its Indic mythology of infinite Buddha-fields; it introduced a distinctively new analysis of cause and effect; it taught an entirely different idea of the relation of the individual to his or her own thoughts and emotions; and it presented a transcendence of Nature by identifying it with illusion.⁴³ These last two were somewhat qualified by the early use of Daoist terms, and the last, in particular, largely modified by the emergence of the distinctively Chinese quasi-Daoist forms of Mahayana, but Chinese philosophy could never go back to the compact nature-myth⁴⁴ that underlay Zhou philosophizing (including that of Xun Qing).

What our historical survey indicates, then, is that there was very little attempt to question the traditional interpretation of Xun Qing as primarily a foil for Mencius' view of human nature, although the neo-Confucians' effort (itself probably religious) to rid Confucianism of any shreds of what they recognized as religion undoubtedly moved their reading of him somewhat closer to the modern interpretation.⁴⁵ I know of no attempt on their part to make the sorts of criticisms of his view of Tian that they would undoubtedly have made of what Dubs called "our popular concept of Nature" (and did make of its forerunner in the teachings of Matteo Ricci and later Jesuits).⁴⁶ All this changed with Hu's study of logical method, and subsequently the attractiveness of taking Xun to be a precursor of science steered thinking into treating him as primarily a naturalistic thinker, even a promising anticipator of modern views. It also gave the *Tian lun* a kind of importance it had not had before.

This book is focused on two words, one English, one Chinese, and on one Chinese document, which we will translate and comment on. As is obvious to the reader by now, the two words are "Tian" and "nature," and the document is the *Tian lun* of the *Xunzi*. Our basic thesis is straightforward: that in the *Tian lun* and the *Xunzi* generally, translating *Tian* as "Nature" introduces such serious systematic distortions that some alternative should be found, and appropriate changes in the understanding of the *Tian lun* should follow.

That this may be true not merely of that document, but of other pre-Qin literature is not denied, but left aside. To what extent Xun Qing's thought agrees with, overlaps, or was influenced by Daoism is a problem we do not essay to answer, despite the acknowledgment that some possible answers to it might suggest modifications in our conclusions.

A lesser ground for our thesis is that both *Tian* in Archaic Chinese and "nature" in English are vague, and, at least in the case of "nature," ambiguous. This would not be, in itself, sufficient reason for writing this book, since, no matter how vague or ambiguous the words may be, they could have sufficient overlap to make the translation of one by the other quite understandable to any reader of normal intelligence.

More important is the contention that the two words are vague or ambiguous in different ways, and carry opposed connotations and overtones, so that whatever conceptual overlap they may have cannot overcome the misleading character of such a translation. Most important, however, is our belief that the practice of translating *tian* by "nature," and the Chinese practice of explaining *Tian* (in the essay) by a Chinese

equivalent of “nature,” *ziran*, in the modern sense in which the latter has come to have close affinities with the sciences, involve a misreading of the *Tian lun*, and, no doubt, other texts.

The issues we are particularly concerned with may be stated in a few theses, which the various interpreters affirm in different degrees and understand with differing nuances. These are as follows:

1. Xun represents a naturalistic or thoroughly skeptical stance toward what was basic in the supernaturalism of his times.

Interpreters vary in the degree they press this point. Dubs writes in 1927, “Having disposed of any personal God, the way was clear to dispose of all other spiritual forces and superstitions. . . . Hsüntze categorically denied the existence of spirits and made fun of their worship,” conceding only that Xun held “the conviction that virtue is rewarded and vice punished.”⁴⁷ Six decades later, Knoblock writes, “Xunzi discounted the magical qualities of ritual and disbelieved entirely in the spiritual realm. He rejected any notion of a sentient Heaven. . . . He endorsed ritual only as an embellishment to life that gave form and expression to our emotions.”⁴⁸ Graham, however, moderates the received interpretation somewhat by admitting, “There is also in Hsün-tzū a certain residual awe of the sacred in nature.”⁴⁹ And 60 years ago Shryock, in his review of Dubs, writes, “It is very misleading to say that Hsüntze ‘eliminated God.’”⁵⁰

2. Xun takes Tian or “nature” to be an impersonal system, devoid of intention, consciousness, or moral significance.

Thus Li Disheng: “Xunzi’s Tian is nature; not at all honored nor revered.”⁵¹ Or Li Du, “Tian is nature, devoid of will.”⁵² Or compare Fung Yu-lan: “Hsün tzū’s Heaven, however, is a naturalistic one . . . inasmuch as it contains no ethical principle.”⁵³

3. Xun sees the events of nature (=Tian) to be regular, law-abiding, and predictable.

Li Du, continuing the above, “This nature has necessary, objective laws.” Again Li Disheng: “That Tian’s way has constancy means there are necessary physical laws.”⁵⁴ Or Dubs: “Heaven, according to Hsüntze, is unvarying Law. . . . Heaven comes to mean very nearly the same as our popular conception of Nature.”⁵⁵

4. Xun views Tian (=“nature”) as available to human exploitation for arbitrary human ends.

Some of these quotations, such as Chen's "Man acts to control Tian (nature)," Jiang's "Control Tian (nature) and use it," and a number of comments of Li Di-sheng, affirm this.

5. Xun devaluates nature (or Tian), assigning it, in contrast to Mencius and Daoism, a negative value.

This emphasis is more to be found in Chinese authors than Western ones.⁵⁶ The argument runs: Xun held that human nature, the gift of Tian, was evil; hence he held that Tian is evil. Shryock notes this over 60 years ago: "In saying that the Nature is evil, Hsuntze either failed to understand Mencius, or he considered Heaven to be evil, or he had no place among orthodox Confucians. This conclusion is commonplace in China."⁵⁷ Even when not articulated, this implication, so unacceptable to Chinese sensibilities, may account for both the discounting of Xun Qing that occurred over the centuries, and for the fact that he appeared in civil-service examinations primarily in questions regarding "Kuang's doctrine," that human nature is evil.⁵⁸ One might note that the more recent version softens the conclusion that Tian is evil, preferring merely to say that, for Xun, Tian is morally irrelevant.

6. Xun views culture as a mere artifact, an imposition on nature.

This overtone is suggested in Tucci's use of the more derogatory term *artificiosa* to translate *wei*, rather than *artificiale*.⁵⁹ In the Zhou background it was assumed that culture was produced by sages; by Xun's times whatever old culture gods there may have been had been euhemerized into presumed ancient historical worthies, whose cultural gifts were in principle harmonious with Tian. The Daoists, however, posed the question: was it the elite culture that harmonized with the cosmos, or a much simpler, rudimentary, plebeian culture? The idea that much of the elite culture was an imposition on nature was prominent in Zhuangzi, the *DDJ*, and Daoists generally. Xun certainly affirmed traditional elite culture. The question for us is, then: did Xun's distinctive twist in dealing with the artificiality of culture agree with the Daoists in taking it to be an imposition on nature? Traditional interpretations are not always clear on this point, but seem to assume he largely did agree with them.⁶⁰

We contend that all these theses are misleading, and some, to significant degree, in error. They will not be treated *seriatim* until our concluding summary, since they involve one another too closely. Instead, we shall first discuss some general philosophic problems relevant to understanding Chinese philosophy and especially Xunzi, then present material introductory to the *Xunzi* and the *Tian lun* essay. Chapters 6 and 7 intro-

duce and present a translation, with commentary, of the essay; the commentary includes a few textual notes, discussions of the structure of the argument, evidence and argument to justify translations that are out of the ordinary, and considerable interpretation. Finally, the last four chapters relate the essay to other parts of the *Xunzi*, focusing on the relation of Tian to various ideas connected with or set against it, leading, we trust, to conclusions worth serious scholars' consideration.