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# DIFFERING VIEWS ON HEAVEN'S ROLE IN ACCOUNTS OF UNDESERVED HARDSHIP IN EARLY CHINA



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## 1. Introduction

There is [that which is controlled by] Heaven, and there is [that which is within the power of] man, and each has its separate lot. Once one has examined the division between Heaven and man, one will know how to act.<sup>1</sup>

Since the discovery of the Guodian 郭店 manuscripts in 1993, the *Qionгда yi shi* 窮達以時 (Time is the cause of adversity and success—hereafter *QDYS*) has gathered much attention, mainly thanks to this opening line, which practically invalidates the previously widely held belief that the division between Heaven and humanity was Xunzi's original idea.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, much effort was spent on analyzing similarities and differences between the *Xunzi* and the *QDYS*, focusing on their concepts of Heaven.<sup>3</sup> But perhaps because of the strong impression made by this first line, the striking difference in the philosophical message between the *QDYS* and its so-called parallel text in the "Youzuo" 宥坐 (Warning vessel on the right) chapter of the *Xunzi* has not attracted enough attention. Scott Cook even stated that "all of these [parallel] texts profess the same fundamental philosophy," but this observation is far from accurate.<sup>4</sup>

In a nutshell, the *QDYS* speaks about prominent ministers of the past whose lives were troubled by hardships when they remained unrecognized. Its basic message is that the chances of encountering a ruler who would appreciate one's value depend completely on "time," and one has no control over this. Thus, one should focus on cultivating one's morality regardless of one's worldly success or failure. In the "Youzuo," however, it is suggested that even adverse circumstances can be beneficial for the virtuous as they provide a chance to advertise one's virtues and help build both prudence and ambition. Success, in this latter view, depends on one's will and wisdom more than on external conditions.

As I scrutinize the specific differences between these two texts, I will further compare them with *Mengzi* 6B15, which talks about virtually the same ministers in the *QDYS* but explains their sufferings as a kind of trial that Heaven has prepared for them. As far as I know, this passage has never been properly discussed along with the *QDYS*, but it serves as an interesting point of comparison for both the *QDYS* and the "Youzuo." Like the *QDYS*,

it argues that success and failure are completely beyond one's control, but, as in the "Youzuo," hardship is described as beneficial for enhancing one's virtues.

My analysis will further show that differences in accounts of undeserved hardship in *Mengzi* 6B15 and the "Youzuo" reflect different understandings of Heaven presented in the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi*, respectively. Mencius regards an anthropomorphic Heaven as responsible for an individual's success, but in the *Xunzi*, Heaven represents objective conditions that one can utilize for one's benefit. Heaven in the *QDYS* is between the two; it is not anthropomorphic, but people are still completely subject to its actions.

## II. The *QDYS* and Its Parallels

Originally, the editors of the Guodian manuscripts identified four texts as parallels to the *QDYS*. They are in the "Youzuo" chapter of the *Xunzi*, the "Zai'e" 在厄 (In quandaries) chapter of the *Kongzi jiaoyu* 孔子家語 (Family sayings of Confucius), the seventh chapter of the *Hanshi waizhuan* 漢詩外傳 (Outer commentary to the Odes by master Han), and the "Zayan" 雜言 (Miscellaneous talks) chapter of the *Shuo yuan* 說苑 (Garden of stories). The basis of this identification is the analogy of an orchid that emits fragrance even in the deep forest where no one is present to appreciate its value. The analogy appears in all these texts, and an example is stated in the *Xunzi* as follows:<sup>5</sup>

Those angelicas and orchids that grow in deep forests do not stop being fragrant just because there is no one [around them].<sup>6</sup>

This analogy fits very well with the fundamental message of the *QDYS*, which is neatly summarized at the end of the manuscript itself:

Time is the cause of adversity and success. Remaining unchanged [in seasons of] darkness or light, noble men endeavors in returning to the self.<sup>7</sup>

In all of the four parallel texts, this message is corroborated with anecdotes of historically famous people who have suffered through hardship before they came to prominence. In the *QDYS*, this list consists of (1) King Shun 舜 (who served King Yao 堯), (2) Gao Yao 皋陶 (King Wuding 武丁), (3) Lü Wang 呂望 (King Wu of Zhou 周武王), (4) Guan Yiwu 管夷吾 (Lord Huan of Qi 齊桓公), (5) Baili Xi 百里奚 (Lord Mu of Qin 秦穆公), (6) Sunshu Ao 孫叔敖 (King Zhuang of Chu 楚莊王), and (7) Wu Zixu 伍子胥 (King Helü of Wu 吳王闔閭). This exact same list is shared in the *Hanshi waizhuan* and *Shuo yuan*. The version in the *Xunzi*, however, with the exception of Wu Zixu, carries a whole different set of historical figures.<sup>8</sup> Confucius, the chief interlocutor in the story, tells his disciple Zilu 子路 of cases of three ministers who met tragic deaths despite their virtues:

Do you believe that wise people are necessarily hired? Did not Prince Bigan 比干 get his heart cut out? Do you believe that loyal people are necessarily hired? Did not Guan Longfeng 關龍逢 get executed? Do you believe that advisors are necessarily hired? Did not Wu Zixu get dismembered outside the eastern gate of Gusu 姑蘇?<sup>9</sup>

Up to this point, the message of the “Youzuo” chapter stays largely in line with that of the *QDYS*. Despite the difference in specific examples, these ministers still represent the same category of virtuous people whose display of competence depends on uncontrollable circumstances. After all, all ministers need the support of a ruler to implement their ideas in government. In this sense, Ning Chen’s reading of this narrative as a claim that “time determines man’s political success and fate determines man’s physical existence” is not completely implausible.<sup>10</sup>

However, after Confucius introduces the analogy of angelicas and orchids, he mentions the sufferings of three other historical figures who were not ministers but hegemons. Like the other ministers, they suffered through hardship in their early days, but according to Confucius, what made them prominent in the end was the change not necessarily in their circumstances but in their mind and will. Specifically, it was the ambition that they came to harbor during the times of their hardship that played the critical role in their ways to success:

In the old days, Prince Chong’er of Jin 晉公子重耳 harbored his ambition to become a hegemon in the state of Cao 曹; King Goujian of Yue 越王勾踐 harbored his ambition at Mt. Kuaiji 會稽; Xiaobai 小白, Lord Huan of Qi, harbored his ambition in the state of Ju 莒. Thus, those who have never been in hiding do not think far into the future, and those who have not been put into exile do not aim for grand [achievements.] How do you know that I have not attained these under the falling leaves of mulberry trees?<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, in his translation of the narrative, Chen chose to leave out this part, which could be an indication that he, too, did not see the cases of these hegemons entirely compatible with his interpretation.<sup>12</sup> Contrary to Chen, John Makeham clearly reads a “political ambition” in the narrative.<sup>13</sup> For Makeham, such a reading is even more justifiable because he relies on parallel texts of the “Youzuo” chapter, namely those in the “Shenren” 慎人 (Being mindful of the human) chapter of the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (Annals of Lü Buwei) and in the “Rangwang” 讓王 (Yielding kingship) chapter of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, which employ a different analogy.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, the analogy of angelicas and orchids does not fit very well with the cases of the hegemons because these images can only represent ministers who remain obscure until rulers come to appreciate their virtues. These flowers emit fragrance even if there is no one around to appreciate the scent, but their true virtue can only be recognized by others. By contrast, the hegemons are not people who waited for others to give them a chance

in this world. They overcame hardship with their own wisdom and will. (The fact that a large part of the success of Lord Huan of Qi is traditionally attributed to his minister Guan Yiwu bears no significance here, as the reason for Lord Huan's success is explicitly found in his ambition and not in his luck in finding a capable minister.) Thus, an analogy that emphasizes "appreciation" is not apt in their cases. If an analogy is to be used, it should be something that signifies overcoming of hardship through one's own power, like an evergreen that remains lush even in winter.

This analogy of evergreens, in fact, appears in the "Shenren" and "Rangwang":

After harsh cold has arrived, and frost and snow have fallen, I see how lush pines and cypresses are. In the old days, Lord Huan of Qi met [such harsh conditions] in the state of Ju; Lord Wen of Jin met them in the state of Cao; King Goujian met them at Mt. Kuaiji. It must be my luck that I met this plight between the states of Chen and Cai.<sup>15</sup>

Compared to how fragrant flowers passively wait to be rescued from their unfavorable (but not necessarily harmful) situations, the evergreens survive through the harsh winter by virtue of their innate strength. Their survival does not depend on changes in external circumstances. Thus, Confucius' message to Zilu here is almost the opposite of that success depends on uncontrollable external circumstances. In the remark that he comes to appreciate the lushness of pines and cypresses only after the harsh winter has arrived, Confucius reveals his thinking that even hard times can ultimately be beneficial for the virtuous because they provide a chance to advertise their virtues. If winter never arrives, no one may ever know that evergreens have such an ability to withstand cold weather. Thus, Confucius' comment is far from the claim in the *QDYS* that "With the right person, but without the right age, even though he be worthy he will be unable to act."<sup>16</sup>

The message that adverse circumstances can actually be beneficial is more vividly captured in other versions of the story of Confucius' plight between Chen and Cai, such as that in the *Kongzi jiayu*, where Confucius continues the conversation with his disciples Zigong 子貢 and Yan Hui 顏回 after he reproaches Zilu with the story of prince Bigan:

Zigong said: "Master's Way is extremely grand, so the world cannot accept you. How about retreating a little [from your ideal]?" The master said . . . "Now you are not cultivating the Way but seeking acceptance. Zigong, your aims are not grand, and you do not think far into the future." Zigong left. Yan Hui entered and asked the same question. Yan Hui said: "Master's Way is extremely grand, so the world cannot accept you. Even so, if you continue to practice it, and the world does not hire us, then it is a shame for the heads of states. What fault is with you, master? When one is not accepted [in this world], it reveals [the nobility] of a noble man."<sup>17</sup>

Yan Hui's final remark here, that Confucius' current plight can only reveal his nobility, is a straightforward statement of what Confucius implied in his appreciation of lush evergreens in winter. Hardship makes a true gentleman stand out among others, and thus manifests one's nobility. For a true gentleman, there can be no harm but only benefit in hardship.

Apart from providing a chance to advertise one's existing virtues, Confucius in the "Youzuo" chapter claims that hardship can even further one's virtues, as hardship makes one think far into the future and aim for grander achievements. And notice how Confucius' reproach to Zigong's shortsightedness in the *Kongzi jiyu* echoes these exact words from the "Youzuo." In this sense, Confucius' reproach is not simply about his disciple's present shortcomings but an indication that, with his willingness to evade hardship, he is far from building prudence and ambition even in the future. Hardship is not only beneficial but also required for one's ultimate success.

The *QDYS* stands in direct contrast to the "Youzuo" in this latter point as well. In the *QDYS*, as well as in its parallels in the *Hanshi waizhuan* and *Shuo yuan*, one's virtue is described as absolutely irrelevant to the sufferings they endured. In the *QDYS* there is the following:

That after beginning submerged in obscurity they would later have their names extolled was not due to any increase in their virtues. That [Wu] Zixu, after many earlier accomplishments, would end up getting executed was not due to any decline in his wisdom.<sup>18</sup>

The exact line saying "was not due to any increase in their virtues" (*fei qi de jia* 非其德加) is absent in two other parallels, but in both texts the comment on Wu Zixu ends as "That [Wu] Zixu, after many earlier accomplishments, would end up getting executed was not due to any *increase or* decline in his wisdom."<sup>19</sup> This addition of the word "increase" indicates that the last comment could apply to all seven figures mentioned.

To summarize, the message of the "Youzuo" differs from that of the *QDYS* in that the former does not describe one's success as being dependent upon external circumstances. For those who can withstand trials, even detrimental circumstances can be beneficial because they build prudence and ambition and also advertise one's virtues to the world. On this difference, *Mengzi* 6B15 presents an interesting middle ground between the *QDYS* and the *Xunzi*. It describes success as completely beyond one's control yet still sees hardship as conducive to furthering one's virtues:

When Heaven is about to bestow a great duty upon someone, it first afflicts their mind and will, makes them toil with their bones and muscles, starves their flesh, impoverishes them, and obstructs their endeavors. By such means, it moves their hearts and controls their natural tendencies. Thus, it raises [their abilities] in areas where they were incompetent.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to the claim in the *QDYS* “that after beginning submerged in obscurity they would later have their names extolled was not due to any increase in their virtues,”<sup>21</sup> Mencius explains that the virtues of these ministers increased in their times of obscurity. In other words, just as in the stories of the *Xunzi* and *Lüshi chunqiu*, the *Mengzi* describes hardship as having been beneficial to the sufferers. Yet also like the *QDYS*, it sees one’s success to be ultimately dependent upon the power that is beyond our reach. This by no means implies that *Mengzi* 6B15 and the *QDYS* share a common understanding of Heaven or the world, but it remains the same in both the *QDYS* and *Mengzi* 6B15 that worthies must wait for circumstances to change on their own before they can do anything.

*Mengzi* 6B15 retains another significant similarity with the *QDYS* in the list of the worthies mentioned. *Mengzi* 6B15 mentions six people, of whom five are shared with the *QDYS*: Shun, Gao Yao, Guan Yiwu, Baili Xi, and Sunshu Ao. The figures that are absent in the *Mengzi* but are present in the *QDYS* are Lü Wang and Wu Zixu. But instead of Lü Wang, *Mengzi* 6B15 has Jiao Ge 膠鬲, who like Lü served King Wu of Zhou. And it should be remembered that Wu Zixu’s case is different from the rest, and that his case does not quite fit with Mencius’ message. Wu is mentioned along with others in the *QDYS* only because his fate suddenly changed for the worse through no fault of his own, and not that he remained unrecognized for a long time. In other words, the lists of worthies in *Mengzi* 6B15 and the *QDYS* are so close that they may be regarded as variant forms of an identical list, and at least one author of either text may have borrowed the list from another source to attach their own interpretation.

The idea that the author(s) of the *QDYS* or *Mengzi* 6B15 was merely borrowing an existing narrative, namely the inexplicable sufferings of eminent individuals in their early days, leads us to a hypothesis that this narrative was a well-known theme that solicited the attention of many intellectuals at the time. Of course, this theme may be seen as a part of the broader issue of “bad things happening to good people,” surrounding which Franklin Perkins portrayed an entire landscape of early Chinese philosophy, but the focus is a little different.<sup>22</sup> If the key examples in Perkins’ books are people like Wu Zixu who met “bad ends” despite their virtue, texts like the *QDYS*, *Mengzi* 6B15, and the “Youzuo” chapter of the *Xunzi* focus on individuals who overcame hardship and ultimately attained success.<sup>23</sup> The central issue of these texts has less to do with asking why such misfortune occurred to the virtuous but more with identifying that which is actually responsible for a person’s ultimate success. Is it luck? Is it Heaven’s will? Or is it the will and wisdom of the individual? The *QDYS*, *Mengzi* 6B15, and the “Youzuo” chapter of the *Xunzi* all present different solutions to this problem, and the role attributed to Heaven in each of these answers also varies among them. Heaven, which is presented as a willful being with power over the fates of individuals in the *Mengzi*, is relieved of all its



anthropomorphic qualities in the *QDYS*, and is equated with objective conditions that can be utilized for one's benefit in the *Xunzi*.

### *III. Differing Views on Heaven's Role in Explanations of Undeserved Hardship*

The fact that the oldest surviving document arguing for a division between Heaven and humanity, along with a complete denial of Heaven's purposefulness, namely the *QDYS*, finds its support in the sufferings of virtuous people is hardly surprising. According to Ning Chen, the sense of conflict between one's virtue and appropriate rewards first became apparent in the Western Zhou period with the introduction of the idea of Heaven's mandate, which "clearly articulated that the morally worthy would be blessed by Heaven."<sup>24</sup> Scholars like Perkins would disagree with Chen over whether this principle applied to individuals as well as sovereigns, but Perkins also acknowledges that accounts of Wu Zixu and other similarly unfortunate figures attracted more attention in the Eastern Zhou period against the background of such moral optimism, and before the introduction of the idea of Heaven's mandate that "bad things happening to good people poses no deep philosophical problem."<sup>25</sup> In other words, Heaven from the beginning has been an inseparable part of the problem of undeserved hardship, and in one way or another the role of Heaven in the sufferings of worthy people had to be explained.

The defense of Heaven given in *Mengzi* 6B15 represents a deeply religious approach to this problem. The explanation that their sufferings were all a part of Heaven's grand scheme to prepare them for larger purposes preserves both the personality and morality of Heaven. Such a religious approach is largely consistent with the overall representation of Heaven in the *Mengzi*, which contains several passages describing Heaven as a willful being whose intention is difficult to comprehend yet holds great power over human beings. For instance, in the account of non-hereditary successions between Yao, Shun, and Yu 禹 in *Mengzi* 5A5, "Heaven is treated as an active and sentient entity, which, albeit not speaking directly with its appointees, intervenes in human affairs and determines who is appropriate to inherit the position of Son of Heaven."<sup>26</sup> Another revealing example is *Mengzi* 2B13, in which Mencius explains the existence of a five-hundred-year dynastic cycle. But for the troubling fact that peace was already overdue by two hundred years by the time of Mencius, his only explanation is that "Heaven does not *wish* to bring peace to the world yet."<sup>27</sup>

There are scholars who would not agree with such a characterization of Heaven in the *Mengzi*. For example, Perkins argues:

In showing a natural causal connection between virtue and success, *Mengzi* aligns with the Mohists but without any role for heaven. Heaven is invoked



only when bad things happen. . . . What seems more likely is that Mengzi has come to equate heaven with fate, *mìng*. Heaven simply represents those forces or events in the world that are inexplicable and irresistible.<sup>28</sup>

Perkins may be right in pointing out that Mencius appeals to an anthropomorphic Heaven only when he is faced with situations that he cannot rationally understand, but this observation does not necessarily support his conclusion that Heaven in the *Mengzi* is “identified with the forces of the world.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, even Perkins himself admits that a “direct view against an anthropomorphic view is difficult to find” in the *Mengzi*.<sup>30</sup> In other words, even if some aspects of the *Mengzi* can be consistent with a more impersonal understanding of Heaven, Mencius himself never explicitly endorsed such a view. Just as Lee Yearley articulated, numerous passages in the *Mengzi* “clearly declare or imply that Heaven has attributes like acting, favoring, caring, or willing (e.g., 1B16, 5A6, even 5A5 under one reading). These passages invalidate any simple picture of Mencius’s Heaven as a ‘pattern’ or ‘structure’ or ‘machine.’”<sup>31</sup>

Interestingly, Perkins’ description of the Mencian conception of Heaven as a representation of “forces or events in the world that are inexplicable and irresistible” fits much better in the *QDYS* than in the *Mengzi*. Only in the *QDYS* is there a complete removal of all references to the anthropomorphic nature of Heaven; instead, Heaven is precisely equated with the forces of the world, as Perkins said.

With the right person, but without the right age, even though he be worthy, he will be unable to act. If given the right age, however, what difficulties would there be? . . . Whether or not [all the aforementioned men] encountered [an appreciative lord] was [a matter controlled by] Heaven. . . . Time is the cause of adversity and success.<sup>32</sup>

Mencius could also have agreed with the claim that whether or not an individual meets an appreciative lord is a matter controlled by Heaven, if it was isolated from the rest of the manuscript. A remarkably similar claim is found in *Mengzi* 1B16, where Mencius blames Heaven for the failed attempt at a meeting with Lord Ping of Lu 魯平公:

Sometimes, one moves forward because [one’s cause] is promoted [by Heaven], and one sometimes stops because [one’s cause] is blocked. To move forward or to be blocked is not within the power of humans. That I did not meet the Lord of Lu is [due to] Heaven.<sup>33</sup>

Mencius’ situation in this passage stands in parallel with those of other characters in the *QDYS*, waiting for a chance to meet a lord who will make use of his talent and virtue to rule the world, but whether or not such a meeting will occur is completely dependent on Heaven. The key difference between the two texts, however, is that Heaven in the *QDYS* is by no means a willful god. In the claim that a worthy person living in the right age will

have no difficulties, we read that what Mencius attributed to Heaven is more or less replaced by “the age” (*shi* 世), which represents the objective conditions of the time. And through the claim that time is the cause of adversity and success, Heaven is once again equated with time.<sup>34</sup>

But if Heaven is more or less equated with the objective conditions of the time, why does the *QDYS* make reference to Heaven at all? Does Heaven in the *QDYS* retain any further meaning that is not covered by concepts like “the age” or “time”? There is no evidence, at least within the *QDYS*, to support such a reading. Even if all references to Heaven were removed from the manuscript, the basic message does not change. We can still read it as an argument to focus on what can be controlled, namely one’s virtue, as outside circumstances are beyond one’s power. Nevertheless, the reference to Heaven is necessary for the author(s) of the *QDYS* because, as discussed above, Heaven has been an inseparable part of the problem of undeserved hardship in early China. Unless one is planning to ignore completely all previous discussions surrounding this problem, one must phrase one’s solution in such a way as to include Heaven, even when the answer practically excludes Heaven’s role. The way the author(s) of the *QDYS* achieved this was by equating Heaven with what they regard as the ultimate cause, the objective conditions of the time. Thus, despite the difference in overall connotations of the word “Heaven,” the *QDYS* still claims, as is the case in *Mengzi* 1B16, that Heaven is responsible for meetings between a worthy person and an appreciative lord.

The exact way the *QDYS* phrased this claim, that “Whether or not [all the aforementioned men] encountered [an appreciative lord] was [a matter controlled by] Heaven” (*yu bu yu tian ye* 遇不遇天也), deserves our further attention. Not only is this phrase similar to what is said in *Mengzi* 1B16 (albeit superficially), but it also appears in the “Youzuo” chapter of the *Xunzi* almost verbatim, only with the word “Heaven” replaced by the word “time” (*yu bu yu shi ye* 遇不遇時也). Obviously, such a close similarity has not gone unnoticed, and served as a ground for arguing that the two texts “must share a common source or sources.”<sup>35</sup> But what is just as important as their similarity is their difference. The context of the *QDYS* already makes it clear that “Heaven” is largely equivalent to “time,” yet the fact that Heaven was explicitly replaced by time in the “Youzuo” suggests that its author(s) felt no need to make even a nominal reference to Heaven for their explanations of the problem of undeserved hardship. Indeed, in the narrative of the “Youzuo” chapter, Heaven’s role is significantly reduced; not once does Confucius, the chief interlocutor in the story, use the word “Heaven.”

Also noteworthy is the context in which this phrase appears. In the *QDYS* this phrase is an isolated claim about Heaven, but in the “Youzuo” it appears within a sequence of similar claims regarding various “forces in the world”:

A person's competence and incompetence depend on one's material composition *cai* 材; to act or not to act depends on the person *ren* 人; to encounter or not encounter [chances of success] depends on time *shi* 時; life and death depend on one's lifespan *ming* 命.

The structure of this passage suggests that time, which controls the chances of encountering opportunities, is only one factor among many things that contribute to our success in this world. And if we remember that the phrase regarding "time" is written with the word "Heaven" in the *QDYS*, this passage allows us to see the extent to which Heaven's role is reduced. Heaven, or objective conditions of time, is still regarded as a factor for our worldly success but only as one among many. There are also our inborn talents, our determination, and our allotted span of life.

Such a reduction of Heaven's role in explanations of undeserved hardship can only be understood in light of Xunzi's view of Heaven. Although it is often argued that the "Youzuo" chapter was not actually written, or even put together, by Xunzi himself, we can see that its fundamental idea is largely consistent with what is said in the more prominent chapters of the *Xunzi*, if we read it as arguing not that "time is the cause of adversity and success" but that we can benefit even from apparently adverse circumstances depending on our will and wisdom.<sup>36</sup>

What is at stake here is the attitude toward external circumstances. The former idea, well portrayed in the *QDYS*, puts a boundary on what is controllable and what is not. Some aspects of our lives, such as whether or not one can meet an appreciative lord, are completely beyond one's control no matter how virtuous or talented a person may be. And in this sense, despite the captivating assertion on the division between Heaven and humans, the basic attitude in the *QDYS* is not far removed from that in the *Mengzi*, in which willful Heaven is said to decide the uses of worthy people. Both texts tell us to keep our minds off the uncontrollable and focus on what can be controlled, namely our virtue.<sup>37</sup> In the "Youzuo" chapter, however, one is advised to engage actively with what has long been regarded as the uncontrollable. What matters is how one responds to the seemingly uncontrollable objective conditions. Even if circumstances are adverse, it is ultimately up to oneself whether such conditions will lead to negative or positive results. Compare this view to what Xunzi says in the "Tianlun" 天論 (Discussions on Heaven) chapter:

There is constancy in Heaven's actions. It is not preserved because of [the virtuous King] Yao, and it did not disappear because of [the wicked King] Jie 桀. When one responds to [the constancy] with order, there will be fortune; when one responds with disorder, there will be misfortune. When one's foundations are strong, and one is frugal in one's uses, Heaven cannot make one poor; when one stocks up provisions and acts in accordance with the seasons, Heaven cannot make one sick; when one cultivates the Way and is not of two [minds], Heaven cannot send calamities. Therefore, flood and

drought cannot cause starvation; cold and heat cannot cause sickness; omens and anomalies cannot cause misfortune.<sup>38</sup>

What Xunzi is denying here is the causal relationship between Heaven's actions, or the changes in external conditions, and individuals' well-being. One's misfortune is not a consequence of natural calamities or any other external factors but of one's inappropriate response to them; proper response can prevent misfortune. Is this not close to what Confucius tried to tell Zilu in the "Youzuo" chapter? In his accounts of the hegemony, their success was precisely due to their positive response to hardship. Xunzi in the "Tianlun" chapter may not necessarily agree with the idea that adverse conditions can somehow be even more beneficial than favorable ones, but the idea that success can be attained regardless of external conditions is unmistakably present in both texts.<sup>39</sup>

What may be relatively weak in the "Youzuo" chapter, however, is the idea of constancy. In the "Tianlun" chapter, Xunzi makes it clear that the way we can stay unharmed even in drought and flood is by relying on the constant patterns of Heaven. And those who disregard these patterns will never be able to flourish even in times of abundance:

For those who oppose the Way and act recklessly, Heaven cannot bring them fortune. Thus, they starve even before flood or drought has struck.<sup>40</sup>

Then by what means does Xunzi argue that we can rely on this constancy? — Through the rituals that the sages have left us. In the past, sages have observed the constant patterns of nature and left us a tool, that is, rituals, to help us navigate our path to prosperity.<sup>41</sup> Thus, even if we ourselves do not precisely understand how this constancy is maintained, the rituals enable us to make use of the perpetual patterns of nature:

Those who cross the waters mark the depth [of the waters]. If the marks are unclear, [those who try to cross the waters later] may drown. Those who brought order to the people marked the Way [of nature]. If the marks are unclear, there will be chaos. Rituals are the marks. Without rituals, the world would be in a muddle. The world in a muddle means great chaos.<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, such a sophisticated understanding of rituals and constancy of Heaven is difficult to read from the "Youzuo." Nevertheless, the way "time" is reduced to merely a factor among many other causes of our success and how our own will and determination has been argued as equally important determinants allow us to see that the "Youzuo" chapter must presuppose a similar understanding of the roles of Heaven and human beings. Consider the following claim in the "Tianlun":

Heaven has [control] over time (*shi* 時); earth has [control] over material (*cai* 材); humans (*ren* 人) have [control] over order. This is the reason by which humans can participate [in the works of Heaven and earth].<sup>43</sup>

This passage may not exactly qualify as a parallel to what we saw above from the “Youzuo” chapter, but the shared terminology is unequivocal. One’s lifespan (*ming*) has no counterpart here, but time (*shi*), material (*cai*), and humanity (*ren*) are all mentioned. The biggest and perhaps the only difference between the two texts is in the focus, where that of the “Youzuo” is on personal life, and that of the “Tianlun” is on order in the state. Nevertheless, the understanding regarding causes of success is unmistakably identical. Whether it is the success of an individual or that of a state, there is a role that humans must play in consideration to available resources (*cai*) and conditions of time (*shi*), and if properly managed, human beings are capable of bringing good results even when circumstances are unfavorable.

To summarize, the philosophical message of the “Youzuo” chapter is coherent with Xunzi’s view of Heaven as seen in the “Tianlun” chapter, and it is fundamentally different from the message of the *QDYS*, despite the two texts being identified as parallels. The *QDYS*, on the other hand, retains many similarities with *Mengzi* 6B15, particularly in its practical solution to the problem of undeserved hardship, despite providing a very different view of Heaven.

#### *IV. Conclusion*

The discovery of the Guodian manuscripts in 1993 provided us with a chance to perceive aspects of the Chinese intellectual landscape of which the received tradition preserved only a partial picture.<sup>44</sup> In particular, the significance of the *QDYS* was quickly noticed, as it contained a claim about the division between Heaven and humanity, something that was long regarded as Xunzi’s original idea. Despite much scholarly attention, however, the striking difference in the fundamental message between the *QDYS* and its parallel in the “Youzuo” chapter of the *Xunzi* remained largely unnoticed, and the obvious similarity between the *QDYS* and *Mengzi* 6B15 was not discussed. But when the three texts, along with their parallels, are compared and analyzed side by side, we find varying accounts of undeserved hardship in early China, in which Heaven plays markedly different roles for a person’s ultimate success in this world.

The *QDYS* differs from *Mengzi* 6B15 in that Heaven is not presented as an anthropomorphic deity; the *QDYS* argues that success and adversity for an individual depend on the objective conditions of the time, over which no one, or nothing, has control. By comparison, Mencius argues that willful Heaven brings hardship on worthies in order to prepare them for grander uses. Despite such a difference, the practical message for individuals is more or less identical: focus on cultivating your virtue instead of spending energy on pursuing uncontrollable worldly success. This message changes in the “Youzuo.” The “Youzuo” chapter inherits the idea of the *QDYS* that whether or not we encounter opportunities of success depends on objective

conditions, but such conditions are considered to be only a factor in our ultimate success. Equally vital is one's attitude, how one responds to external conditions. If we respond right, we can even turn misfortune to fortune. This shows that in the "Youzuo" chapter there was a philosophical transition from merely passively focusing on the inner cultivation and disregarding what lies beyond one's control to an active engagement with the workings of what was previously thought to be an uncontrollable nature. I have shown that this change of view is closely associated with the understanding of Heaven defended in the "Tianlun" chapter of the *Xunzi* in which Xunzi maintained that human beings can bring order and prosperity to this world even in times of natural disaster if we respond properly to the constancy of Heaven.

## Notes

- 1 – [Cook](#), *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian*, p. 453. Throughout this article I rely heavily on Scott Cook's version of the *QDYS*, which is a product of his thorough analysis of previous reconstructions of the manuscript. All translations of the *QDYS* given in this article are by Cook unless otherwise noted.
- 2 – Ikeda Tomohisa once argued that the *QDYS* is later than the *Xunzi* ([Ikeda Tomohisa](#) 池田知久, "Guodian Chujian 'Qiongda yi shi' yanjiu," pp. 140–151). But the archaeological evidence from the Guodian tomb makes this claim extremely unlikely ([Asano Yūichi](#), "Kakuten Sokan 'Kyūtatsu i ji' no 'Ten jin no bun' ni tsuite," pp. 22–24). And even from the perspective of intellectual history, many have showed that the *Xunzi* cannot be earlier than the *QDYS*. See, e.g., [Kondo Noriyuki](#), "Junshi no kyūtatsu-ron to 'Kyūtatsu i ji'." On the other hand, Liao Mingchun's argument that Confucius himself was the author of the text seems equally improbable ([Liao Mingchun](#), "Jingmen Guodian Chujian yu xian-Qin ruxue," pp. 43–45).
- 3 – [Liang Tao](#), "Zhujian 'Qiongda yi shi' yu zaoqi rujia tianrenguan," pp. 65–66; [Pang Pu](#), "Kong Meng zhi jian," pp. 91–92; [Li Xueqin](#), "Tian ren zhi fen," pp. 239–244. For a more detailed survey of scholarship on the *QDYS*, see [Cook](#), *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian*, pp. 429–451.
- 4 – [Cook](#), *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian*, p. 434.
- 5 – In the actual bamboo manuscript, this part is damaged, so the words for angelica and orchid are illegible, but enough of the context survives, including the word "fragrance" (*fāng* 芳), to make the reconstruction reliable. See [Guodian Chumu zhujian](#), 28, p. 146 n. 15; [Cook](#), *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian*, p. 462 n. 65.



- 6 – [Wang Xianqian](#), ed., *Xunzi jijie*, p. 527.
- 7 – [Guodian Chumu zhujian](#), p. 145 (my translation).
- 8 – Thus, Liao Mingchun’s remark that “even though there is a little difference, [the lists of figures in two texts] match in general” is not an accurate observation ([Liao Mingchun](#), “Jingmen Guodian Chujian yu xian-Qin ruxue,” p. 44).
- 9 – [Wang Xianqian](#), *Xunzi jijie*, p. 526.
- 10 – [Chen](#), “The Problem of Theodicy in Ancient China,” p. 66. Paul Goldin also supports this reading; see [Goldin](#), *After Confucius*, p. 179 n. 84 (see note 36 below).
- 11 – [Wang Xianqian](#), *Xunzi jijie*, p. 527.
- 12 – The only way we can read Confucius’ message here to be in line with that of the *QDYS* is if we interpret this passage to mean that objectively harsh conditions automatically generate wisdom and ambition in the minds of the sufferers. Then the ultimate cause of their success would be the harsh circumstances, not their virtues. But this kind of interpretation would create more problems than solutions. First, it would mean that Confucius was plainly denying the more common view that harsh conditions are detrimental to success. Second, it could make Confucius a kind of determinist, as the argument would be that a person’s will can be determined by external conditions. None of these positions is easy to defend.
- 13 – [Makeham](#), “Between Chen and Cai: *Zhuangzi* and the *Analects*,” pp. 87–88. Unfortunately, the *QDYS* was not a part of his analysis probably because it does not frame its story within Confucius’ plight between Chen and Cai, but had Makeham discussed the *QDYS* in this work he would certainly have noticed the difference in the philosophical idea.
- 14 – The difference in the analogy is probably the reason that these texts were not mentioned by the original editors of the Guodian manuscripts. For an overview of all the materials that may be seen as parallels to the *QDYS*, see [Cook](#), *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian*, pp. 431–439.
- 15 – [Chen Qiyou](#), ed., *Lüshi chungqiu xin jiaoshi*, p. 810. Cf. [Knoblock and Riegel](#), *The Annals of Lü Buwei*, pp. 325–326. The “Rangwang” chapter also carries this analogy, but it leaves out the part explaining the cases of the three hegemonies. See [Guo Qingfan](#), ed., *Zhuangzi jishi*, pp. 981–983.
- 16 – [Cook](#), *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian*, pp. 453–454.
- 17 – [Wang Guoxuan and Wang Xiumei](#), *Kongzi jiaoyu*, p. 167.



- 18 – [Cook](#), *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian*, p. 463.
- 19 – This sentence appears almost verbatim in all three texts with the exception of the character for “increase.” In the *QDYS* the character is absent; in the *Hanshi waizhuan* it is written as *cheng* 盛; in the *Shou yuan* it is *yi* 益.
- 20 – [Mengzi zhengyi](#), p. 864.
- 21 – [Cook](#), *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian*, p. 463.
- 22 – See esp. the first chapter, “Formations of the Problem of Evil” (pp. 10–44), in [Perkins](#), *Heaven and Earth Are Not Humane*, to understand how Perkins situates the problem of “bad things happening to good people” as one of the central concerns of early Chinese philosophy.
- 23 – See *ibid.*, pp. 17–26.
- 24 – [Chen](#), “The Genesis of the Concept of Blind Fate in Ancient China,” p. 159.
- 25 – [Perkins](#), *Heaven and Earth Are Not Humane*, p. 28. As for whether or not the idea applied to individuals, Chen maintains that the idea of Heaven’s mandate can indeed be “applied to account for an individual’s fortune and misfortune” ([Chen](#), “The Genesis of the Concept of Blind Fate in Ancient China,” p. 153). But Perkins’ view is more convincing. He writes, “the discussions of the rewards and punishments of heaven are limited to the actions of rulers. There is no general claim that good is always rewarded and bad always punished. In fact, that cannot be the view, because it was primarily the people—whether innocent or guilty—who suffered when the ruler was bad” ([Perkins](#), *ibid.*, p. 32).
- 26 – [Pines](#), *Envisioning Eternal Empire*, p. 74.
- 27 – [Mengzi zhengyi](#), pp. 309–312.
- 28 – [Perkins](#), *Heaven and Earth Are Not Humane*, p. 123. Hou Wailu and others also describe Heaven as “an objective principle” (客观的道理) when discussing passages like 5A5. See [Hou Wailu](#), [Du Guoxiang](#), and [Zhao Jibin](#), *Zhongguo sixiang tongshi*, vol. 1, p. 395. See also [Ivanhoe](#), “Heaven as a Source for Ethical Warrant in Early Confucianism,” pp. 215–218; [Shun](#), *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*, pp. 207–210.
- 29 – [Perkins](#), *Heaven and Earth Are Not Humane*, p. 127.
- 30 – *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- 31 – [Yearley](#), “Toward a Typology of Religious Thought,” p. 423 n. 12. Perkins also cites this passage in an endnote; see [Perkins](#), *Heaven and Earth Are Not Humane*, p. 253 n. 3.

- 32 – [Cook](#), *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian*, pp. 453–464. The translation of *qiong da yi shi* in the last line is my own.
- 33 – [Mengzi zhengyi](#), pp. 170–171.
- 34 – Pang Pu points out that the fact that Heaven in the *QDYS* is equal to concepts like “the age” is what differentiates its philosophy from that of the *Xunzi*, in which Heaven represents nature in general ([Pang Pu](#), “Kong Meng zhi jian,” p. 91).
- 35 – [Goldin](#), *After Confucius*, p. 50.
- 36 – This is despite Goldin (see [Goldin](#), *After Confucius*, p. 179 n. 84). Goldin’s reading of the “Youzuo” chapter is in agreement with that of Ning Chen in [Chen](#), “The Problem of Theodicy in Ancient China,” pp. 65–66 (see note 10 above). The view that the “Youzuo” was not written by Xunzi but is only a collection of pedagogically useful stories that circulated at the time of Xunzi or his disciples is seen even in the oldest surviving commentary to the *Xunzi* by Yang Liang 楊倞 (fl. 818 C.E.) ([Wang Xianqian](#), *Xunzi jijie*, p. 520). And for this reason some scholars are cautious about taking the chapter as an accurate representation of Xunzi’s philosophy. E.g., see [Kondo Noriyuki](#), “Junshi no kyūtatsu-ron to ‘Kyūtatsu i ji’,” p. 11.
- 37 – This may be one of the most fundamental messages of both the *Lunyu* and the *Mengzi*. See [Chen](#), “The Concept of Fate in Mencius,” p. 515; [Eno](#), *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, p. 130; [Slingerland](#), “The Conception of Ming in Early Confucian Thought,” pp. 576–577; [Goldin](#), *Confucianism*, p. 55.
- 38 – [Wang Xianqian](#), *Xunzi jijie*, pp. 306–308.
- 39 – [Chen Qiyou](#), *Lüshi chunqiu xin jiaoshi*, p. 810; [Guo Qingfan](#), *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 982.
- 40 – [Wang Xianqian](#), *Xunzi jijie*, p. 308.
- 41 – For a more thorough explanation of this view, see [Goldin](#), *Confucianism*, pp. 80–84.
- 42 – [Wang Xianqian](#), *Xunzi jijie*, pp. 318–319.
- 43 – *Ibid.*, p. 308.
- 44 – [Liao Mingchun](#), “Guodian Chujian rujia zhuzuo kao,” pp. 69–83; [Goldin](#), *After Confucius*, pp. 36–57.

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