It was only when I first read Mengzi's book that I finally understood that the Way of Kongzi (Confucius) is worthy of veneration, that the Way of the sages is easy to practice, that it is easy for a king to act like a king, and it is easy for a dictator to act like a dictator. In my opinion, after the immediate disciples of Kongzi passed away, the only one who really venerated the sages was Mengzi. I only got to read the writings of (the Han Dynasty Confucian) Yang Xiong much later, and this made me venerate and have faith in Mengzi even more. If the writings of Yang Xiong lead one to venerate Mengzi even more, is Yang Xiong not then also a disciple of the sages?!\(^1\)

The Way of the sages was not transmitted down through the generations. As the Zhou Dynasty decayed, those who liked to meddle in affairs each sought the patronage of rulers with their own theory. In droves they created chaos together. The Six Classics (the orthodox Confucian classics the *Odes, Documents, Changes, Spring and Autumn Annals, Record of Rites,* and *Classic of Music*) and the theories of the Hundred Schools (of philosophers) got mixed together. Nonetheless, old masters and great Confucians still existed. After the burning of prohibited books during the Qin Dynasty and the Huang-Lao Daoism of the Han Dynasty, the only pure ones who survived were Mengzi and Yang Xiong. I obtained the writings of Xunzi and then realized that there was Xunzi too. When I examined his words, they at times seemed unorthodox, but if one seeks for their basis, their differences with Kongzi are slight. Would he not be between Mengzi and Yang Xiong (in his orthodoxy)?

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\(^1\) Yang Xiong (53 BCE-18 CE) lived in an era when many combined Confucianism with elaborate theories of fortune-telling and numerology, which they based in part on texts other than the established classics. Yang Xiong criticized such approaches, saying, "Books that do not follow the classics are no books," and referring to contemporary supernatural views as "the drum beating of the witches" (quoted in Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 2, Derk Bodde, trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 147 and 148, respectively).
Kongzi edited the *Odes* and *Documents*; he preserved and edited the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. What was consistent with the Way he highlighted; what deviated from the Way he expunged. Hence, the *Odes, Documents* and *Spring and Autumn Annals* have no imperfections. I want to edit out what in Xunzi is inconsistent (with the Way of the sages), and add it to the corpus of the sages. Would this not be what Kongzi would have wanted?

Mengzi was the purest of the pure. Xunzi and Yang Xiong were largely pure, but with small imperfections.

[Translator's Comment: Although the title of this essay is "On Reading Xunzi," what is perhaps most important about it is that it establishes Mengzi as the most orthodox (the most "pure") of the followers of Kongzi (Confucius). This is very significant, because while Mengzi had always been considered an important Confucian thinker, it is only with the Neo-Confucians that he attains the status of the orthodox inheritor and expositor of the Way of the sages. Interestingly, Han Yu criticizes the theories of human nature of Xunzi, Yang Xiong AND Mengzi in his own essay, "On Human Nature." Whether human nature was good or bad was one of the primary topics of disagreement between Mengzi and Xunzi, so it is intriguing that Han Yu should favor Mengzi so strongly when he disagrees with his view on human nature. Perhaps Han Yu thought it was less mistaken to say that human nature was good (as Mengzi did) than to say that it was bad (as Xunzi did).]