SAGESQUOTE

Xunzi

荀子

42 QUOTES

Xunzi (荀子)

The Confucian who said human nature is raw material, and ritual is the tool that shapes it.

CONFUCIANISM

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Inside this collection

Every entry below gives four things: the saying in English, the original Chinese as it stands in the text, the book or chapter it comes from, and who translated that line. Nothing here is copied from a modern edition.

- **42** sayings from Xunzi (荀子).
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Xunzi (荀子). Xun Kuang stands against Mencius: we are not born good, we are born pliable, and everything decent about us is made. His essays are the most argued prose of the classical period — on study, on ritual, on names, and on heaven as nothing but nature doing what nature does.

01 The gentleman says: learning must never cease.

君子曰：學不可以已。

Xunzi (荀子), "Exhortation to Learning" 勸學, Chapter 1
Translated for SagesQuote

02 Indigo is drawn from the blue plant yet is bluer than it; ice is made from water yet is colder than water.

青，取之於藍，而青於藍；冰，水為之，而寒於水。

Xunzi (荀子), "Exhortation to Learning" 勸學, Chapter 1
Translated for SagesQuote

03 Wood straight enough to match the plumb line can be bent into a wheel whose curve matches the compass; once dried out in the sun it will not straighten again, for the bending has made it so.

木直中繩，輮以為輪，其曲中規，雖有槁暴，不復挺者，輮使之然也。

Xunzi (荀子), "Exhortation to Learning" 勸學, Chapter 1
Translated for SagesQuote

04 So wood turns straight under the plumb line and metal turns sharp on the whetstone; the gentleman learns widely and examines himself daily, and thus his understanding is clear and his conduct free from fault.

故木受繩則直，金就礪則利，君子博學而日參省乎己，則知明而行無過矣。

Xunzi (荀子), "Exhortation to Learning" 勸學, Chapter 1
Translated for SagesQuote

05 I have spent whole days in thought, and it was no match for a moment of learning; I have stood on tiptoe to look, and it was no match for the wide view from a height.

吾嘗終日而思矣，不如須臾之所學也；吾嘗跂而望矣，不如登高之博見也。

Xunzi (荀子), "Exhortation to Learning" 勸學, Chapter 1
Translated for SagesQuote

06 The gentleman is not born different from others; he is simply good at making use of things.

君子生非異也，善假於物也。

Xunzi (荀子), "Exhortation to Learning" 勸學, Chapter 1
Translated for SagesQuote

07 Pile up earth and a mountain forms, and wind and rain arise there; gather water and a deep pool forms, and dragons are born there; pile up good and virtue is formed, and a clear spirit comes of itself and the sage's heart is complete.

積土成山，風雨興焉；積水成淵，蛟龍生焉；積善成德，而神明自得，聖心備焉。

Xunzi (荀子), "Exhortation to Learning" 勸學, Chapter 1
Translated for SagesQuote

08 Without piling up single steps one cannot reach a thousand miles; without gathering small streams one cannot make a river or a sea.

不積蹞步，無以至千里；不積小流，無以成江海。

Xunzi (荀子), "Exhortation to Learning" 勸學, Chapter 1
Translated for SagesQuote

09 A fine steed in one leap cannot cover ten paces; a worn-out horse can go ten daysjourney, for the achievement lies in not giving up.

騏驥一躍，不能十步；駑馬十駕，功在不舍。

Xunzi (荀子), "Exhortation to Learning" 勸學, Chapter 1
Translated for SagesQuote

10 Carve and then stop, and even rotting wood will not be cut through; carve without stopping, and metal and stone can be engraved.

鍥而舍之，朽木不折；鍥而不舍，金石可鏤。

Xunzi (荀子), "Exhortation to Learning" 勸學, Chapter 1
Translated for SagesQuote

11 P'eng grass growing among hemp stands straight without propping up; white sand lying in black mud turns black along with it.

蓬生麻中，不扶而直；白沙在涅，與之俱黑。

Xunzi (荀子), "Exhortation to Learning" 勸學, Chapter 1
Translated for SagesQuote

12 The gentleman chooses his neighborhood with care and seeks out men of worth in his travels; this is how he guards against what is crooked and draws near to what is upright and true.

君子居必擇鄉，遊必就士，所以防邪僻而近中正也。

Xunzi (荀子), "Exhortation to Learning" 勸學, Chapter 1
Translated for SagesQuote

13 Words can invite disaster and acts can invite disgrace, so the gentleman is careful about where he stands.

言有召禍也，行有招辱也，君子慎其所立乎！

Xunzi (荀子), "Exhortation to Learning" 勸學, Chapter 1
Translated for SagesQuote

14 The gentleman's learning enters the ear, settles in the heart, spreads through the four limbs, and shows itself in movement and repose; the petty man's learning enters the ear and goes out the mouth.

君子之學也，入乎耳，著乎心，布乎四體，形乎動靜。小人之學也，入乎耳，出乎口。

Xunzi (荀子), "Exhortation to Learning" 勸學, Chapter 1
Translated for SagesQuote

15 Where does learning begin and where does it end? In its method it begins with reciting the classics and ends with reading ritual; in its meaning it begins with becoming a scholar and ends with becoming a sage.

學惡乎始？惡乎終？曰：其數則始乎誦經，終乎讀禮；其義則始乎為士，終乎為聖人。

Xunzi (荀子), "Exhortation to Learning" 勸學, Chapter 1
Translated for SagesQuote

16 Seeing goodness, he resolutely makes it his own; seeing what is not good, he grows solemn and examines himself.

見善，修然必以自存也；見不善，愀然必以自省也。

Xunzi (荀子), "On Self-Cultivation" 修身, Chapter 2
Translated for SagesQuote

17 One who criticizes me rightly is my teacher; one who approves of me rightly is my friend; one who flatters me is my enemy.

非我而當者，吾師也；是我而當者，吾友也；諂諛我者，吾賊也。

Xunzi (荀子), "On Self-Cultivation" 修身, Chapter 2
Translated for SagesQuote

18 Though the Way is near, one who does not walk it will not arrive; though a task is small, one who does not do it will not finish it.

道雖邇，不行不至；事雖小，不為不成。

Xunzi (荀子), "On Self-Cultivation" 修身, Chapter 2
Translated for SagesQuote

19 Ritual propriety is the means of making the person upright; the teacher is the means of making ritual propriety correct.

禮者，所以正身也；師者，所以正禮也。

Xunzi (荀子), "On Self-Cultivation" 修身, Chapter 2
Translated for SagesQuote

20 The gentleman commands things; the petty man is commanded by things.

君子役物，小人役於物。

Xunzi (荀子), "On Self-Cultivation" 修身, Chapter 2
Translated for SagesQuote

21 To put righteousness first and profit last is honor; to put profit first and righteousness last is disgrace.

先義而後利者榮，先利而後義者辱。

Xunzi (荀子), "On Honour and Disgrace" 榮辱, Chapter 4
Translated for SagesQuote

22 The gentleman is ashamed of his own lack of cultivation, not of being defamed; ashamed of being untrustworthy, not of being distrusted; ashamed of being incapable, not of being passed over for office.

君子恥不修，不恥見汙；恥不信，不恥不見信；恥不能，不恥不見用。

Xunzi (荀子), "Against the Twelve Masters" 非十二子, Chapter 6
Translated for SagesQuote

23 Not hearing is not as good as hearing; hearing is not as good as seeing; seeing is not as good as understanding; understanding is not as good as acting. Learning comes to its end in acting.

不聞不若聞之，聞之不若見之，見之不若知之，知之不若行之。學至於行之而止矣。

Xunzi (荀子), "The Achievements of the Confucians" 儒效, Chapter 8
Translated for SagesQuote

24 Heaven's course is constant: it does not exist because of Yao, nor perish because of Jie.

天行有常，不為堯存，不為桀亡。

Xunzi (荀子), "Discourse on Nature" 天論, Chapter 17
Translated for SagesQuote

25 Heaven does not end winter because men dislike the cold; the earth does not give up its breadth because men dislike the distance.

天不為人之惡寒也輟冬，地不為人之惡遼遠也輟廣。

Xunzi (荀子), "Discourse on Nature" 天論, Chapter 17
Translated for SagesQuote

26 Strengthen the root and spend sparingly, and Heaven cannot make you poor; keep provisions ample and act in season, and Heaven cannot make you sick; cultivate the Way without wavering, and Heaven cannot bring you harm.

強本而節用，則天不能貧；養備而動時，則天不能病；脩道而不貳，則天不能禍。

Xunzi (荀子), "Discourse on Nature" 天論, Chapter 17
Translated for SagesQuote

27 Exalt Heaven and ponder it — how is that better than tending it as a thing and governing it? Follow Heaven and praise it — how is that better than taking hold of Heaven's order and making use of it?

大天而思之，孰與物畜而制之？從天而頌之，孰與制天命而用之？

Xunzi (荀子), "Discourse on Nature" 天論, Chapter 17
Translated for SagesQuote

28 Heaven has its seasons, the earth has its wealth, and man has his ordering; this is what is called being able to form a triad.

天有其時，地有其財，人有其治，夫是之謂能參。

Xunzi (荀子), "Discourse on Nature" 天論, Chapter 17
Translated for SagesQuote

29 The ruler is the boat; the common people are the water. The water bears the boat up, and the water capsizes it.

君者，舟也；庶人者，水也。水則載舟，水則覆舟。

Xunzi (荀子), "The Regulations of a King" 王制, Chapter 9
Translated for SagesQuote

30 How is it that humans can form a community? Through the division of roles.

人何以能群？曰：分。

Xunzi (荀子), "The Regulations of a King" 王制, Chapter 9
Translated for SagesQuote

31 The way to enrich the state is to spend sparingly, make the people prosperous, and store well what is left over.

足國之道，節用裕民，而善臧其餘。

Xunzi (荀子), "Enriching the State" 富國, Chapter 10
Translated for SagesQuote

32 What does ritual arise from? People are born with desires; when desires go unsatisfied they cannot but seek, and when seeking has no measure or boundary, contention cannot but follow.

禮起於何也？曰：人生而有欲，欲而不得，則不能無求；求而無度量分界，則不能不爭。

Xunzi (荀子), "Discourse on Ritual" 禮論, Chapter 19
Translated for SagesQuote

33 The former kings hated such disorder, so they made ritual and righteousness to assign each his share, in order to nourish people's desires and satisfy their seeking.

先王惡其亂也，故制禮義以分之，以養人之欲，給人之求。

Xunzi (荀子), "Discourse on Ritual" 禮論, Chapter 19
Translated for SagesQuote

34 Ritual has three roots: Heaven and Earth are the root of life; ancestors are the root of the kindred; ruler and teacher are the root of order.

禮有三本：天地者，生之本也；先祖者，類之本也；君師者，治之本也。

Xunzi (荀子), "Discourse on Ritual" 禮論, Chapter 19
Translated for SagesQuote

35 The trouble with people in general is that they are blinded by one corner of things and left in the dark about the greater pattern.

凡人之患，蔽於一曲，而闇於大理。

Xunzi (荀子), "Dispelling Obsession" 解蔽, Chapter 21
Translated for SagesQuote

36 How does the mind come to know? By being empty, unified, and still.

心何以知？曰：虛壹而靜。

Xunzi (荀子), "Dispelling Obsession" 解蔽, Chapter 21
Translated for SagesQuote

37 Names have no inherent fitness; agreement is used to assign them. Once an agreement is settled and custom formed, a name is called fitting; what departs from the agreement is called unfitting.

名無固宜，約之以命。約定俗成謂之宜，異於約則謂之不宜。

Xunzi (荀子), "On the Correct Use of Names" 正名, Chapter 22
Translated for SagesQuote

38 When the true king establishes names, the names become fixed and the realities distinguished, the Way is put into practice and intent is understood.

王者之制名，名定而實辨，道行而志通。

Xunzi (荀子), "On the Correct Use of Names" 正名, Chapter 22
Translated for SagesQuote

39 Human nature is evil; whatever good there is in it comes from conscious effort.

人之性惡，其善者偽也。

Xunzi (荀子), "Man's Nature Is Evil" 性惡, Chapter 23
Translated for SagesQuote

40 By nature people are born fond of profit; follow this and contention arises while deference and yielding disappear.

今人之性，生而有好利焉，順是，故爭奪生而辭讓亡焉。

Xunzi (荀子), "Man's Nature Is Evil" 性惡, Chapter 23
Translated for SagesQuote

41 Crooked wood must wait for the straightening frame, steaming and bending, before it is straight; blunt metal must wait for grinding on the whetstone before it is sharp. Human nature is evil, and must wait for teacher and law before it is made right, and for ritual and righteousness before it is ordered.

故枸木必將待檃栝、烝矯然後直；鈍金必將待礱厲然後利。今人之性惡，必將待師法然後正，得禮義然後治。

Xunzi (荀子), "Man's Nature Is Evil" 性惡, Chapter 23
Translated for SagesQuote

42 Any man in the street can become a Yu.

塗之人可以為禹。

Xunzi (荀子), "Man's Nature Is Evil" 性惡, Chapter 23
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ONE TO KEEP

Without piling up single steps one cannot reach a thousand miles; without gathering small streams one cannot make a river or a sea.

不積蹞步，無以至千里；不積小流，無以成江海。

— Xunzi (荀子), "Exhortation to Learning" 勸學, Chapter 1

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