

“SELF-CULTIVATION” (XIU SHEN 修身)
IN THE EARLY EDITED LITERATURE:
USES AND CONTEXTS

OLIVER WEINGARTEN

1 Introduction

Self-cultivation is one of the central issues in the study of premodern Chinese thought and culture. It is closely associated with Confucian varieties of moral and ritual self-discipline, featuring prominently in discussions of Song Neo-Confucianism as well as in scholarship on early Confucianism and ancient philosophy more broadly. In his influential *History of Chinese Philosophy* (*Zhongguo zhexue shi* 中國哲學史), first published between 1931 and 1934, Fung Yu-lan (Feng Youlan 馮友蘭, 1895–1990) does not seem to use “spiritual cultivation” (the equivalent of self-cultivation in Bodde’s English translation) in connection with any philosopher or philosophical school before the Song dynasty.¹ There is a common notion of Confucius (551–479 BCE) as a teacher of morality who “propagated the value of education, virtue and self-cultivation.”² According to Paul Goldin, the tenet that “moral development begins with moral self-cultivation” is one of “a set of basic convictions” which all Confucians shared.³ It has been argued that in Confucianism “self-cultivation has an undeniably strong moral sense” as well as a less often recognised “metaphysical dimension” already present in the teachings of Confucius himself.⁴ And in his study of non-action (*wu wei* 無為) as a “spiritual state” of “almost supernatural efficacy” and as a “set of dispositions that has been so thoroughly transformed as to conform with the natural

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1 This is suggested by the index in Fung and Bodde 1952. In Bol 2008 “self-cultivation” does not seem to figure at all. Compare this to the numerous discussions which are, according to the index, included in Makeham 2010, 464–465.

2 Yao 2000, 26.

3 Goldin 2011, 5.

4 Yan 2014, 363.

order”, Edward Slingerland gives pride of place to self-cultivation as the means by which to reach this state of mind.⁵

Forms of mental discipline outside the Confucian tradition are likewise considered under the rubric of self-cultivation. In his analysis of certain writings in *Guanzi* 管子 and *Huainan zi* 淮南子, most importantly “Nei ye” 内业 (“Inward Training”; *Guanzi* 49), Harold Roth speaks of “theories of the physiological basis of psychology and self-cultivation” in the early Daoist tradition.⁶ Philip Ivanhoe characterises the self-cultivation of the Daoists, explaining they “argued that we need to transform ourselves in order to realize our true nature and that this task is critical to the aim of a peaceful world and good life.”⁷ Wang Shumin 王叔岷 gives the concept of self-cultivation in the *Laozi* 老子 a political reading, according to which the ruler’s ostentatious dismissal of self-interest serves precisely his own interests.⁸ Self-cultivation also figures prominently in treatments of physico-psychological techniques variously employed to preserve well-being, stave off disease and, generally, to prolong life or even attain immortality.⁹

Ivanhoe appears to have developed the broadest possible understanding of self-cultivation. He applies the term to Chinese intellectual and religious traditions, including Buddhism, beginning from the Shang 商 dynasty (ca. 1570–1045 BCE), and points out that, among Western philosophers, Aristotle (ca. 384–322 BCE) engaged in reflection on self-cultivation as well.¹⁰ Over the last few decades, some Western philosophers have turned to Aristotle’s virtue ethics in response to what they consider shortcomings of deontological and consequentialist ethical systems. More recently, this trend has inspired specialists in Chinese philosophy to explore correspondences between virtue ethics and Confucianism, often with a focus on Confucian notions of self-cultivation.¹¹ It can thus

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- 5 Slingerland 2003, 7. Discussions of conceptual metaphors for self-cultivation are found, e. g., *ibid.*, 46, 50, 52–55, 266.
 - 6 Roth 1991, 608. The ideas in question may have been more widespread in Roth’s own view. Parts of *Guanzi* 49 suggest to him that there was “an interest in applying the principles of Taoist inner cultivation to a Confucian context”. See Roth 1999, 30.
 - 7 Ivanhoe 2011, 36.
 - 8 Wang Shumin 1992, 41–44.
 - 9 See Raphals 2015; Lo 2005.
 - 10 Ivanhoe 2000, “Introduction”. On Aristotle’s view of virtues as “excellences” which can be acquired by constant practice in the same manner as skills, see Russell 2015. For an extended discussion of the skill analogy, see Annas 2011.
 - 11 On virtue ethics in the Western context, see the “Introduction” to Hursthouse 1999. Van Norden (2007, 29–59) provides a useful overview of virtue ethics in general and the application of its framework to Chinese philosophy with a focus on early Confucianism. Here and elsewhere (e. g., 227–246, on *Mengzi*), Van Norden discusses the role of “(ethical) cultivation” and “self-cultivation”. For a recent collection of essays which continue the dialogue between

be said that many scholars of Chinese thought perceive self-cultivation as a significant component in the teachings of numerous thinkers, Confucian or otherwise, and as a concern that is also shared by non-Chinese philosophical traditions. There is, moreover, the prospect of a fruitful intercultural dialogue about the foundations of ethical thought that explores possible shared ideas about the cultivation of virtue.

Still, however useful the notion of self-cultivation may be as an analytical and philosophical category, it does have its pitfalls. This holds true in particular for the supposedly earliest group of Confucian texts. "Self-cultivation" is the most common translation of the Chinese term *xiu shen* 修身, though *xiu* 修 / 脩 on its own, understood in the sense of "adornment", has also been proposed as a "primary metaphor for self-cultivation", especially in Confucian contexts.¹² *Xiu shen* does not appear, however, in the *Guanzi* chapters Roth examines. Nor is it found in the *Lunyu* 論語, where the closest equivalent would seem to be *xiu ji* 修己, "cultivating the self".¹³ Ronnie Littlejohn, who identifies Confucian self-cultivation with the love of learning (*hao xue* 好學), maintains that there "is no single word in the *Analects* for self-cultivation, but as a concept Confucius taught, its imprint is very often present in the earliest stratum of his teachings." On this understanding, Confucius's ideal of self-cultivation as attested in the *Lunyu* "includes character development, enhancement of talents (e. g. archery, music, building, management, etc.) and refinement (*wen* 文) of one's very humanity in itself."¹⁴ Andrew Plaks explains that "the word *xue* in Confucian discourse covers the full spectrum of personal accomplishment from the active

Western and Chinese ethics, see Angle and Slote 2013. Self-cultivation is a recurrent topic throughout the entire book.

- 12 Slingerland 2003, 50; see also *ibid.*, 213, on *xiu* as the "most Confucian of metaphors". For him (*ibid.*, 50), *xiu* specifically denotes "decorating or adorning a surface" and thus partakes in the tension between *zhi* 質, "native stuff", and *wen* 文, "cultural refinement". However, this may be a misreading of the philological and linguistic evidence. Commentarial glosses frequently equate *xiu* with *zhi* 治, "to put in order"; see Zong Fubang 2007, 223, glosses no. 2–6. Furthermore, Axel Schuessler (2007, 542–543) suggests that *xiu* [*siu < *sliu?] could be an s-causative derived from *lju; cf. the word *tiao* 條 [*liù] "orderly" (by mistake represented through the graph 修 by Schuessler). Note that *yang sheng* 養生, "nurturing life", is likewise often translated as "self-cultivation" in discussions of medicine and longevity techniques. See Raphals 2015, section 2: "Nurturing Life (*yang sheng*)" as well as "Introduction", where Raphals explains that medicine "included 'nurturing life' (*yang sheng* 養生), a broad category that comprised a wide range of self-cultivation techniques". See also Lo 2005, 209.
- 13 *Lunyu* 14.42. *Lunyu* 7.3 speaks of the "non-cultivating of virtue" (*de zhi bu xiu* 德之不修). Both passages are discussed in Slingerland 2003, 50. *Lunyu* references throughout are to He Zhihua and Chen Fangzheng 1995. For a table of occurrences of *xiu shen* in pre-Qin and Han texts, refer to the Appendix.
- 14 Littlejohn 2011, 31, with a reference to *Lunyu* 5.15.

to the contemplative spheres. It begins at the more advanced levels of actual instruction, but then extends to the widest realization of human potential. The idea of the perfection of individual character at the heart of these spheres of Confucian attainment precisely matches the scope and meaning of the central idea of ‘self-cultivation.’”¹⁵

Evidently, scholars frequently invoke the concept of self-cultivation in places where *xiu shen* remains unexpressed on the lexical level. Slingerland, for example, discusses in detail the conceptual metaphor of self-cultivation as agriculture in *Mengzi* 孟子 as the “dominant model for the process of education”, though neither *xiu shen* nor *xiu* appear in the text under consideration.¹⁶ On some level, such analytical practices are unremarkable. For instance, there is nothing objectionable about positing an author’s interest in the originality of literary creations despite the fact that the term “originality” is absent from his work or indeed the lexicon of his time.¹⁷ Such an interpretation, which aims to identify or give expression to a latent concept, can be wholly appropriate, even if applied from an etic perspective. Similarly, a modern reader can label certain mental or physical exercises promoted in Chinese texts *xiu shen*, even in the absence of the expression, on the understanding that a competent ancient Chinese informant would not consider this a misapplication of the term. But at the very least, such a practice is bound to raise nettlesome questions about potential disparities between emic and etic conceptualisations. If we could resurrect Confucius, would he agree that “love of learning” is coterminous with self-cultivation, as Ronnie Littlejohn posits? Would Mencius be happy to see education equated with self-cultivation? Sure enough, these are idle questions, and fortunately we do not have to adjudicate on them. Nonetheless, it will be fruitful to ponder how far our own conceptual map matches that of our ancient authors.

Toward this end, two approaches suggest themselves. We could trace the outlines of the concepts of self-improvement, cultural refinement, moral or spiritual discipline, and the like. This can be done through an onomasiological study, an investigation into descriptions and terms relating to practices which are intended to shape one’s mind and conduct in a particular manner. Arguably, this is an important aspect of what modern

15 Plaks 2014, 142.

16 Slingerland 2003, 266. This understanding of self-cultivation, which is echoed in Littlejohn’s reference to “love of learning”, is also found in Slingerland’s discussions of conceptual metaphors in *Xunzi* 荀子, e. g., in Slingerland 2003, 53. In the entire *Mengzi*, the term *xiu shen* occurs only twice, in 7A.1 and 7A.9.

17 Referring to the beginning of John Milton’s (1608–1674) *Paradise Lost*, Quentin Skinner (1989, 7–8) points out that “while the concept [originality] is clearly central to his thought, the word did not enter the language until a century or more after his death.”

readers understand by "self-cultivation".¹⁸ Alternatively, we can tackle the issue in the opposite manner and explore attested uses of *xiu shen* in order to tease out the implications of this term in different contexts. The present article takes the second approach. It has limitations, for in not attempting to establish the precise semantic contents of *xiu shen*, it does not proceed in a properly semasiological fashion. It also does not intend to offer a comprehensive outline of the concept self-cultivation.

Following Harald Weinrich's reminder that the study of concepts is best conducted through an investigation of concrete linguistic expressions in texts, this article will not expound on the significance of self-cultivation or *xiu shen*, but instead contribute to a more fine-grained understanding of the contents of this concept by clarifying one particular term.¹⁹ The following discussion is accordingly loosely informed by two approaches which have been sometimes presented as distinct, if not antithetical: the German project of conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*) and the programme of the "Cambridge School" of intellectual history associated most prominently with John Pocock and Quentin Skinner.

Conceptual history's focus on tracing the semantic changes of political terms in order to reveal the transformations of underlying concepts (being manifestations of frequently conflict-laden political and social realities, especially at the transition to modernity) has sometimes been viewed as irreconcilable with the interests of Pocock and Skinner. They focussed on broader strands of political discourse, reading statements on politics as political acts in themselves that can only be properly understood if scrutinised as part of a network of synchronic rhetorical moves.²⁰ Few of the differences that observers have

18 There are a number of expressions which suggest themselves for further lexical investigation. An open and non-systematic list may include such items as *shen xing* 慎行, *ze xing* 擇行, *cao xing* 操行, *duan xing* 端行, *zheng jie* 正節, *shou jie* 守節, *xiu jie* 修節, *zhi qi* 治氣, *yang xin* 養心, *yang sheng / xing* 養生/性, *jie xing* 潔行, *zhi shen* 治身, *yong xin zhi shu* 用心之術, *shou dao* 守道, *jie ji* 潔己, *shen ji* 審己, *xing yi* 行義, *shou yue* 守約, *shou qi* 守氣, *xiu ji* 修己, *xiu xin* 修心, *yang qi* 養氣, *xin zhai* 心齋, *zuo wang* 坐忘, *zheng shen* 整身, *xiu yi* 修意, *xiu zhi* 修志, and, perhaps, *zi shou* 自守, though this term seems to carry a fairly concrete meaning. All these terms are attested in pre-Qin and Han texts, and they all appear to represent concepts akin to self-cultivation, or certain aspects thereof.

19 Weinrich (2000, 25–33), "Wort und Begriff". Note that Weinrich treats the belief in a neat separation between words and concepts with ironic scepticism.

20 For an English-language introduction to the historical background and to the aims of conceptual history, see Richter 1995. On the main exponents of the "Cambridge School" see ch. 6: "Pocock, Skinner, and *Begriffsgeschichte*". Here, Richter summarises Pocock's principles of investigating "languages" (in the sense of Saussurean *langues*) of politics, which imposes constraints on what historical actors could meaningfully express. Richter also explains Skinner's view of reading political statements as speech acts requiring careful synchronic contextualisa-

noted between the German and the British approach, however, seem absolute, let alone irreconcilable. In fact, both “share [...] a common concern with political language treated historically, and the insistence on both sides that political thought and behavior, now and in the past, cannot be understood without reference to the distinctive vocabularies used by agents in given contexts.”²¹ Furthermore, Reinhart Koselleck, one of conceptual history’s founding figures and its most eminent theoretician, insisted on its propaedeutic nature vis-à-vis the writing of history. Within his theoretical framework, conceptual history was never meant to be more than a cornerstone in the much larger edifice of social history, broadly conceived.²²

In this vein, the present article will attempt, in a preliminary fashion, to contribute to what appears set to turn into a broader stream of research into the conceptual and intellectual history of China and perhaps East Asia more generally.²³ The caveat will nevertheless be borne in mind throughout that compared to modern and early modern Europe, upon which Pocock, Skinner, and Koselleck have trained their sights, ancient China offers much sketchier information on social groups and political forces. Any conclusions, therefore, will inevitably remain somewhat tentative.

2 Radiant Virtue: Princely Self-Cultivation

Several texts stress the central importance of self-cultivation for the creation of political order, as part of a model of rulership according to which virtue radiates outwards from the person of the monarch with universally beneficial effects. This perspective ties in with the

tion. Richter sceptically remarks that Skinner’s actual historical work is far less radical or novel than his theoretical statements which are grounded in the linguistic philosophy of J. L. Austin and John Searle. Hampsher-Monk (1998, 46–47) explains that in “characteristic Anglophone empiricist fashion they [Pocock and Skinner] would reject the notion that anything as abstract as a ‘concept’ could be a possible subject of primary historical investigation.”

- 21 Richter 1995, 124. Note, however, that Keith Tribe (2016, 63) regards Richter’s attempt to reconcile the two research programmes “primarily as a tactical appeal to an anglophone audience”.
- 22 See Tribe 2016, 62. For Koselleck’s own views on the relationship between conceptual and social history, see his “Sozialgeschichte und Begriffsgeschichte”, first published in 1986 (Koselleck 2006). For an English version, see “Social History and *Begriffsgeschichte*”, ch. 2 in Hampsher-Monk et al. 1998.
- 23 See Vogelsang 2012, for conceptual history in general and for its study in the context of Chinese and East Asian societies. Several relevant articles can be found in the same issue of *Oriens Extremus*.

view of the sage ruler as moral lodestar attributed to Confucius.²⁴ *Zhongyong* 中庸, ch. 20, parts of which are echoed in other writings,²⁵ records a speech by Confucius directed at Duke Ai 哀 of Lu 魯 (r. 494–477 BCE) and a speech by the “Master” (*zi* 子), thought to be Confucius as well.²⁶ The first passage sets out an interlocking grid of “three virtues leading to success” (*da de san* 達德三) and “five principles leading to success” (*da dao wu* 達道五). The former refer to knowledge (*zhi* 知), benevolence (*ren* 仁), and courage (*yong* 勇); the latter to a set of social and familial relationships: ruler and minister; father and son; married couples; brothers or cousins; and friends. The second passage presents a different system of “nine guidelines” (*jiu jing* 九經), which exhibits substantial similarities with the arguments presented in the first passage. In particular, both share the concern with self-cultivation and “treating parents as parents” (*qin qin* 親親).²⁷ It may also be noted as a text-critical matter that traditional commentators have deemed the first passage in question lacunary.²⁸

Despite the differences between the conceptual outlines, the two passages complement each other. As the first passage states toward the end, there are different paths by which one can advance towards the three virtues of knowledge, benevolence, and courage. The virtues can be present at birth; otherwise, one must make a conscious effort to foster them. Nonetheless, once one has the virtues, it ultimately irrelevant how they were achieved. Such views on the origin of the virtues respond to an anxiety over the unpredictability of personal qualities and over the imperfections of those who strive for them.

The beginning of the second passage appears to speak to similar concerns. It lists qualities which fall short of a full realisation of the virtues in question, yet resemble them:

好學近乎知，力行近乎仁，知恥近乎勇。

Love of learning comes close to knowledge. To act with one's full strength comes close to benevolence. To know shame comes close to courage.

24 *Lunyu* 2.1.

25 Parallels to *Zhongyong* 20 with minor variants can be found in *Shuoyuan jiaozheng* 16, 407 (“Tan cong” 談叢); *Hanshu* 62, 2727 (“Sima Qian zhuan” 司馬遷傳).

26 *Zhongyong* 20 (Legge, *Doctrine of the Mean*), 404–414. For a variant version of the dialogue see *Kongzi jiyu* 4.17, 117–118 (“Ai gong wen zheng” 哀公問政). Some terms and ideas in *Zhongyong* 20 closely resemble ones discussed in *Huainanzi*. See *Huainan zi* 9, 1024 (“Zhu shu xun” 主術訓); transl. in Major 2010, 9.32, 339.

27 Note that the importance of filial piety (*xiao* 孝) is highlighted in *Hanshi waizhuan* 5, 464. In this passage, self-cultivation is (1) specifically presented as a means to foster attitudes compatible with family obligations, and (2) discussed within the wider context of how superiors can influence and shape the behaviour of those below them.

28 See Lackner 1996, 36, on the defective parallelism in his passage no. 9.

The two passages are connected by the concern over the inability of individuals to live up to the demands of virtue.

Beyond that, the first passage offers a guideline for practicing moral governance. At the heart of such moral governance lies the practice of self-cultivation.

為政在人，取人以身，修身以道，修道以仁。仁者人也，親親為大；義者宜也，尊賢為大。

The practice of governance depends on people. One selects people on the basis of one's own person; one cultivates one's person according to the Way; and one cultivates the Way according to benevolence. 'Humaneness' is '[being] human', and [for being humane], to treat parents as parents should be treated is of utmost importance. 'Righteousness' is behaving appropriately, and [for behaving appropriately], to honour worthy people is of utmost importance.

Good governance depends on the careful selection of appropriate personalities to hold office and exercise power. The personal qualities of the one who does the selecting determines the standards by which officials are picked. They also influence whether suitable candidates will feel inclined to enter his service. Humaneness is the virtue at the root of self-cultivation. It is nurtured by proper emotional attachment to and service for one's own parents. Only a man who functions adequately as part of his own family can be regarded as a trustworthy patron or ruler in political contexts. Appropriate behaviour toward one's parents, it is implied, mirrors appropriate attitudes toward worthy men, who are the kind of person best suited to staffing the ranks of a functioning administration.

In another approach to the subject of self-cultivation, the first passage of *Zhongyong* 20 avers:

君子不可以不修身；思修身，不可以不事親；思事親，不可以不知人；思知人，不可以不知天。

The noble man cannot but cultivate his person. If he longs to cultivate his person, he cannot but serve his parents. If he longs to serve his parents, he cannot but understand men. If he longs to understand men, he cannot but understand Heaven.

Presented in this way, self-cultivation follows a sequence of achievements: understanding Heaven; understanding other people; serving one's parents; cultivating one's person. The chain originates with the notion of comprehending Heaven, which adds a metaphysical element to the discussion. The main stress, however, is placed on the individual's capacity for nurturing familial and social relationships.

The second part of *Zhongyong* 20, the one which begins with a *zi yue* 子曰 incipit, treats the understanding of virtues as the starting point for the process of self-cultivation.

知斯三者，則知所以修身；知所以修身，則知所以治人；知所以治人，則知所以治天下國家矣。

If one understands these three [virtues of knowledge, benevolence, and courage], then one understands the means by which to cultivate one's person. If one understands the means by which to cultivate one's person, then one understands the means by which to govern people. If one understands the means by which to govern people, then one understands the means by which to govern the state and the entire realm.

Self-cultivation is one of the nine guidelines propounded in this section of the text. Specifically, it refers to "cultivating one's own person; honouring worthy men; treating kin as kin should be treated;²⁹ respecting great ministers; putting oneself in the position the many ministers; treating common people like one's children; attracting all the different kinds of artisans; mollifying people in distant regions; and cherishing the many lords." The effects and uses of self-cultivation, as presented in the explanatory remarks following these guidelines, tend towards the practical.

修身則道立，尊賢則不惑，親親則諸父昆弟不怨，敬大臣則不眩，體群臣則士之報禮重，子庶民則百姓勸，來百工則財用足，柔遠人則四方歸之，懷諸侯則天下畏之。

If one cultivates his own person, then the proper Way will be established. If one honours worthy men, then he will not suffer delusions. If one treats his kin as kin should be treated, then his 'various fathers' [i. e. male relatives of the father's generation in the paternal line], cousins and younger brothers will not feel aggrieved. If one respects great ministers, then his vision will not be blurred. If one puts himself in the position of the many ministers, then men of service will repay ceremonious treatment with solemnity. If one treats common people like his children, then the hundred clans will feel motivated. If one attracts all the different kinds of artisans, then wealth and goods will be adequate. If one mollifies people in distant regions, then the people of the four quarters will seek refuge with him. If one cherishes the many lords, then the entire realm will hold him in awe.

To properly adjust one's own moral compass and to act accordingly is an efficient way to secure the loyalty and allegiance of various groups and individuals both in and outside one's state. This, in turn, contributes to one's status and authority in other parts of the realm as well as to the prosperity of one's own state.

A comparable amalgamation of supernatural beliefs with practical and moral considerations can be found in a characterisation of the mythical emperor Ku 嚳 attributed to Confucius (551–479 BCE) in a conversation with one of his disciples:

生而神靈，自言其名；博施利物，不於其身；聰以知遠，明以察微；順天之義，知民之急；仁而威，惠而信，修身而天下服。取地之財而節用之 [*lonh *tə], 撫教萬民

29 In the first part of *Zhongyong* 20, the use of *shi qin* 事親 "to serve one's *qin*" suggests that *qin* refers to parents. As the following quote from the second part of *Zhongyong* 20 shows, where *qin* appears to encompass various relatives, the same term is probably used here in a broader sense.

而利誨之 [*hməh *tə], 歷日月而迎送之 [*loŋh *tə], 明鬼神而敬事之 [*dzrəʔ *tə]。其色郁郁, 其德嶷嶷, 其動也時, 其服也士。春夏乘龍, 秋冬乘馬, 黃黼黻衣, 執中而獲天下; 日月所照, 風雨所至, 莫不從順。

At his birth he had numinous powers and spoke his own name. He gave liberally and benefited other beings, but not himself. With his acute hearing, he perceived the remote; with his sharp vision he examined the minute. He followed Heaven's standard of appropriateness; he was aware of the exigencies of the people. Humane, yet awe-inspiring, generous and trustworthy, he cultivated his person, and the people submitted. He took the riches of the earth but used them with moderation. He consoled and instructed the ten thousand people, benefited and taught them. He arranged days and months in sequence to welcome and send off the sun and moon. He had understood the ghosts and spirits and served them respectfully. His mien was refined; his virtue lofty. His actions were timely; his garments those of an officer. In spring and summer, he was riding a dragon; in autumn and winter, a horse. In yellow embroidered garments, he held on to the mean and gained the realm. Wherever sun and moon were shining, whatever places were reached by storms and rain, there was no-one there who did not submit.³⁰

The legendary emperor of yore emerges here as a prodigy and ideal ruler who fulfils his obligations toward his people as well as the spirit world. His superhuman powers combine with moderation, generosity, and prudence to guarantee the welfare of the people.

Whilst pragmatic considerations set the tone in the part of *Zhongyong* 20 just discussed, the same passage also makes the ritual roots of self-cultivation explicit:

齊明盛服, 非禮不動, 所以修身也。

To engage in purification up to a state of illumination (?)³¹ and to be clad in lavish garments; not to become active unless it is in accordance with ritual propriety – these are the means by which to cultivate one's person.

On this understanding, self-cultivation consists in a discipline of physical and mental self-cleansing accompanied by a lavish display of ritual attire and strict adherence to ritual norms. A similar connection, this time between the ancient ritual music and antiquity, is posited in the *Liji* 禮記, “Record of Music”, in a statement attributed to Zixia 子夏. He says about musical performances:

30 *Da Dai liji* 62, 120–121 (“Wu di de” 五帝德). See also *Shiji* 史記 1, 13, where, unlike in *Da Dai liji* 大戴禮記, the information on the mythical emperors is not presented in the form of a dialogue. Here and throughout, reconstructed pronunciations are from Schuessler 2009.

31 As of January 24, 2016, Donald Sturgeon's excellent website www.ctext.org returns 25 hits for the search term *zhai ming* 齊明. The term may refer to a state of particular mental clarity with potential external manifestations.

君子於是語 [*ŋaʔ], 於是道古 [*kâʔ], 修身及家 [*krâ], 平均天下 [*graʔ]: 此古樂之發也。

At this time, noble men talk. They are then guided by antiquity. Their self-cultivation extends to the family, and they create peace and harmony in the realm. Such are the effects of ancient music.³²

Aside from depicting self-cultivation as intertwined with ritual music, the passage also conceives of it as a practice whose effects radiate outwards in a manner similar to the nested social and spatial order presented in the introductory section of *Daxue* 大學, which will be discussed below.

We may characterize the notion of self-cultivation as articulated in *Zhongyong* 20 in the following way: (1) Self-cultivation involves a process of disciplining one's behaviour and shaping one's attitudes. This process has transcendental and religious overtones. (2) Self-cultivation is a moral project which is based on, and further nourishes, particular virtues. (3) Self-cultivation is a crucial step in the promotion of social and political order which, in turn, has tangible beneficial outcomes for the world at large.

Self-cultivation as envisioned here contributes to the moral foundations of social practices which adhere to hierarchical patterns of respect and seniority ("treating one's parents/kin as they should be treated"; "honouring worthy men"). Transcendental and religious aspects are hinted at ("understanding Heaven"; "engaging in purification up to a state of illumination [?]"). but they seem to mainly form the general backdrop – or one of several possible conceptual backdrops – of self-cultivation. The religious dimension is not particularly stressed or developed. Pragmatic aspects and practical results are, by contrast, very much foregrounded.

At this point, it is perhaps worth recalling the anxiety over the limits of moral perfectibility that seems to inform some of the observations on virtue. Here, it is said that virtue may be attained along different paths and can also be replaced by less demanding qualities and efforts such as love of learning, exhausting one's strength, and knowing shame. When viewed in conjunction, such anxiety as well as the pragmatic focus of the passage appear to express an attitude that falls short of an absolutist conception of moral excellence and spiritual discipline. Instead, its aim seems to be to persuade by offering practical benefits rather than by imposing rigorous and uncompromising spiritual demands. This stands in stark contrast to the introductory passage of the *Daxue*.

The *Daxue*, whose "central theme", according to Andrew Plaks, "concerns the substance and the ordering of the Confucian process of self-cultivation", likewise conceives of political order as radiating outwards from the centrally positioned person of the ruler.³³

32 *Liji* 38, 1013. See also *Shiji* 24, 1222.

33 Plaks 2014, 144. For comparable visions of a centralised spatial and social order in other texts, see Lewis 2006, 3–5.

But the *Daxue* places greater emphasis on mental discipline by highlighting such notions as “rectifying the heart/mind” (*zheng xin* 正心) and “achieving integral wholeness in one’s consciousness” (*cheng yi* 誠意).³⁴ In addressing the practice of mental discipline, the *Zhongyong* does not aspire to, and is indeed perhaps not interested in, such a level of precision. At the same time, the *Daxue* does not envision self-cultivation as the sole preserve of the ruler but, instead, as a practice common to the whole of society.

自天子以至於庶人壹是，皆以脩身為本。

From the Son of Heaven to the common man, they focus solely on this, and they all consider self-cultivation the root.³⁵

This envisages a stricter approach to self-cultivation than hitherto encountered, one which burdens each member of society with a responsibility for moral and mental self-discipline. In contrast to *Zhongyong* 20, the introductory section of *Daxue* starts out from internal aspects of the person and presents a concentric, nested spatio-political order in which the effects created within individual social and spatial units spill over into neighbouring ones, albeit without any indication of how this comes to pass. As if the concrete practices and outcomes of self-cultivation were self-evident, no particular virtues are named and none of the effects is explicated. Self-cultivation acquires a transcendent, absolute quality, its effects rippling through the entire social and political fabric.

By comparison, in *Zhongyong* these effects are more specific (relating to particular virtues) and more qualified (imperfections remain). The introductory sequence of *Daxue* promotes an idealised, transcendent view of self-cultivation, whereas in the *Zhongyong* self-cultivation operates within more realistic and pragmatic boundaries. Both texts assume the perspective of the sage ruler, but an important difference remains. In the concentric spatial model of the *Daxue*, namely, the benign effects of self-cultivation spread outwards, while the practice itself simultaneously percolates downwards through the layers of the social hierarchy.

An historical anecdote about Duke Wen 文 of Jin 晉 (r. 636–628 BCE), which is variously repeated in Han works, combines and modulates some of these elements. It stresses the apotropaic efficacy of ritual discipline, whilst also illustrating the preponderance of politics over the supernatural.³⁶ On a hunting trip, a giant snake blocks Duke Wen’s path. When his servants suggest attacking it, he holds them back, explaining:

34 *Daxue* (Legge, *Great Learning*), 356–359. The translation of *cheng qi yi* follows Plaks 2014, 143 and *passim*.

35 *Daxue* (Legge, *Great Learning*), 359.

36 *Xinshu* 6, 248–249 (“Chun qiu” 春秋); *Xinxu* 2.9, 215–219 (“Zashi” 雜事); *Fengsu tongyi* 9, 421 (“Guai shen” 怪神): *shi jian duo you gou zuo bian guai* [...] 世間多有狗作辯怪 [...].

吾聞之曰：『天子夢惡則脩道，諸侯夢惡則脩政，大夫夢惡則脩官，庶人夢惡則脩身，若是則禍不至。』今我有失行，而天招以妖，我若攻之，是逆天命。

I heard the following: "If the Son of Heaven has nightmares, he cultivates the Way. If the many lords have nightmares, they cultivate governance. If the grandees have nightmares, they cultivate their official duties. If commoners have nightmares, they cultivate their persons. If they act in such a way, disaster will not strike." Now, I have committed wrongs, and Heaven beckons at me with an anomalous creature. Were I to attack it, this would be going against Heaven's command.³⁷

The duke's reflections on "cultivation" are triggered by an inauspicious omen similar to the portentous force of a nightmare. In the vein of moralistic omen interpretation, he concludes that he has to improve his own conduct to avert disaster. He confesses to five blameful acts (*zui* 罪), all of which are related to flawed political judgment, except one: "I was not dignified in my purification exercises, and my grain offerings were not unblemished" (齋肅不莊，粢盛不潔). His confession is part of a "purifying sojourn" (*zhai su* 齋宿) in the ancestral temple.³⁸

Whilst the concept self-cultivation is easy to recognise behind these practices and statements, it is necessary to make two important observations. First, despite the attention the duke pays to ritual, the main emphasis of the anecdote is political. His self-confessed failures are mostly of a political nature: He is relieved of the snake's looming presence when he "retires and cultivates governance" (退而脩政), after which he witnesses in a dream how Heaven executes the snake. Second, in the present context, the term regularly translated as self-cultivation, *xiu shen*, is only applied to the lowest-ranking members of society. Nobles and rulers of states engage in forms of cultivation commensurate to their status and remit. Where the *Daxue* promotes the ideal of a cultivation of the person across the rungs of society without making any distinctions, the present anecdote puts forward a graded scale that differentiates according to rank and power.³⁹ And whilst the supernatural and religious elements of the anecdote are unmistakable, its thrust is directed more at the actual practice of political rule than at the promotion of spiritual exercises.

To sum up, according to both *Zhongyong* 20 and *Daxue* 1, princely self-cultivation is a core prerequisite for the establishment of a functioning political order. There are, however, notable differences between the respective outlooks reflected in these texts. One the one hand, *Zhongyong* underscores the concrete and pragmatic effects of a virtue-based

37 *Xinshu* 6, 249.

38 *Ibid.*

39 This differentiation mirrors rank and status disparities, whereas the otherwise analogous case of the *shi* 士 assuming special responsibility through self-cultivation (discussed in section 5) represents a claim to prestige and influence based on their alleged moral superiority.

order and, simultaneously, makes allowances for moral imperfectibility. If absolute moral excellence cannot be attained, approximating it by aiming for lesser qualities is admissible. On the other hand, the *Daxue* espouses a more rigorous ideal of self-cultivation which demands mental discipline from members of all levels of society. At the same time, both the concrete effects of self-cultivation and its connection with particular virtues go unmentioned. Lastly, in the anecdote about Duke Wen, we encounter a view of cultivation – possibly in a non-moral sense of “caring for” – as a status-dependent obligation which acknowledges the presence of religious and supernatural factors, but places comparatively more weight on concrete policies.

It may be noted that the lofty effects which the texts under discussion attribute to *xiu shen* contrast strongly with more mundane uses of the term in writings covering a timespan of roughly four centuries, from late pre-unification Qin to the Eastern Han (see below, section 5). A related, though qualitatively different position to those represented in *Zhongyong* and *Daxue* can be found in Wang Chong's 王充 (27–ca. 100 CE) *Lunheng* 論衡. Dismissing the belief that the performance of one particular piece of music caused a storm, Wang argues:

實者樂聲不能致此。何以驗之？風雨暴至，是陰陽亂也。樂能亂陰陽，則亦能調陰陽也，王者何須脩身正行，擴施善政？使鼓調陰陽之曲，和氣自至，太平自立矣。

In fact, music cannot bring about any such thing [i. e., violent storms]. How to demonstrate this? Onslaughts of storm and rain are due to disorders of *yin* and *yang*. If music could throw *yin* and *yang* into disorder, it could also be used to regulate them. What need would there be for a king to cultivate his person and straighten out his behaviour, to broadly apply benevolent policies? He could give orders to drum out tunes that regulate *yin* and *yang* – harmonious *qi* would arrive all by itself, and great peace would be established by itself.⁴⁰

The remark on *xiu shen* is counterfactual, which leaves open the possibility that self-cultivation might serve a purpose that music cannot: fine-tuning the waxing and waning of *yin* and *yang* in order to forestall disaster. Yet, elsewhere Wang Chong disputes the power of self-cultivation, at least with regard to preventing man-made misfortune:

脩身正行，不能來福；戰栗戒慎，不能避禍。禍福之至，幸不幸也。故曰：「得非己力，故謂之福；來不由我，故謂之禍。」不由我者，謂之何由？由鄉里與朝廷也。

It is impossible to summon good fortune by self-cultivation and by maintaining correct conduct. It is impossible to avoid misfortune by acting with caution and trepidation. Whether good or bad fortune arrive depends on whether one is lucky. Hence it is said: “It is not due to one’s own powers that one gets it, hence it is called good fortune. It does not

40 *Lunheng* 19, 245 (“Gan xu” 感虛).

come from oneself, hence it is called misfortune." Given that "it does not come from oneself", where is it said to come from? From the village or from the court.⁴¹

Contrary to what one might expect or wish for, according to Wang Chong bad things may very well happen to those who try to be good. No causal connection exists between conduct and fate, and any attempt to reason from "ought" to "is" would be fallacious. Moreover, the kind of person Wang is concerned with was most likely the middle-ranking official, whose life was as likely to be affected by capricious court decisions as by the actions of his neighbours. Such a close link between office and self-cultivation is also posited elsewhere in the *Lunheng*.⁴² In contradistinction to the worldview of *Zhongyong* and *Daxue*, Wang Chong did not focus on the possible empire-wide effects of *xiu shen*. Neither did he place much trust in a practice which, according to the other two texts, had the power to affect transformation throughout the entire realm. The workings of nature and the course of fate belonged to different categories. Each was governed by its own laws.

3 *Xunzi* 2, "Xiu shen": Stress on Social Interaction and Formulaic Style

The eponymous second chapter of the *Xunzi* 荀子 discusses the significance of *xiu shen* for those either aspiring to or already holding office. Excluding the title, *xiu shen* appears only twice in the entire chapter.⁴³ Nonetheless, the title can be understood as an accurate summary of the text's underlying theme. Its contents reflect the common understanding of self-cultivation as a process of moral self-perfection. Furthermore, the text reveals some noteworthy facets of the concept with regard to self-cultivation's social determinants and its purpose as well as the role and significance of psycho-physiological practices often considered Daoist.

On the view promoted in "Xiu shen", cultivating one's moral personality is a process that goes hand in hand with constructive social interactions and is based on the norms of "ritual propriety" (*li* 禮). Self-cultivation is not a solitary activity. The text begins with an exhortation to be mindful of what is "good" (*shan* 善) and what is "bad" (*bu shan* 不善), the former constituting a leitmotif of the first few paragraphs.

見善，脩然必以自存也；見不善，愀然必以自省也。善在身，介然必以自好也；不善在身，菑然必以自惡也。

On observing goodness, feel happy and unfailingly scrutinise yourself in its light; on observing badness, feel sad and unfailingly examine yourself in its light. If there is goodness

41 *Lunheng* 2, 10 ("Lei hai" 累害).

42 *Lunheng* 28, 401 ("Wen Kong" 問孔) is a discussion of the perennially debated *Lunyu* 4.5. Yet, the passage also reveals whom Wang has in mind as practitioners of *xiu shen*: officials, who will seek, through their conduct and performance, to gain noble rank and lush emoluments.

43 Once in the phrase *xiu qi shen* 修其身.

in your person, you will be firm and unfailingly attain excellence for yourself because of it; if there is something bad in your person, you will be blackened (?) and unfailingly consider yourself detestable because of it.⁴⁴

These programmatic statements speak of the need to engage in self-reflection. They operate with a vocabulary of self-examination (*cun* 存, *xing* 省). This seems to point to an understanding of self-cultivation as an introspective practice. To the contrary, however, the process of self-examination takes the observation of others as its starting point, and the remainder of the introductory section is a systematic exposition of the idea that moral character is formed through the right kind of social intercourse. The difference between the noble man (*junzi* 君子) and the petty man (*xiao ren* 小人) is that they allow themselves to be influenced by different types of people. The former seeks the company of those who offer moral guidance and benign criticism; the latter moves among flatterers and insulates himself from detractors and any corrective influences on his conduct. Accordingly, the noble man will “progress” (*jin* 進), whereas the petty man will “be exterminated” (*mie wang* 滅亡). The noble man’s helpful critics are his “teachers” (*shi* 師). At the beginning, the term is used metaphorically – teachers are defined as “those who accurately condemn one’s person” (*fei wo er dang zhe* 非我而當者).⁴⁵ Later, teachers feature as instructors in ritual matters, who have to be obeyed in the same way as the rules (*fa* 法) of ritual itself.⁴⁶ Here, the reference is clearly to a pedagogue of sorts. Moral self-improvement can only be achieved if one critically measures one’s own conduct against the example set by others. It is furthered by critical responses from those with whom one interacts. Finally, it relies on explicit instruction by a teacher – though, notably, “teacher” is also used in a metaphorical sense – who conveys binding doctrine.

As outlined in the introduction, scholars also apply the term self-cultivation to the contemplative psycho-physiological techniques which, according to Harold Roth, were at the heart of early Daoism. “Xiu shen” appears to address both types of self-cultivation, conceiving of them as distinct activities with different ends.

扁善之度，以治氣養生，則後彭祖；以脩身自名，則配堯禹。

All-around goodness as a standard – if one applies it to control one’s *qi* and nourish one’s life, one will grow older than Pengzu; if one applies it to cultivate one’s person and make oneself renowned, one will become a match for Yao and Yu.⁴⁷

44 *Xunzi* 2, 46 (“Xiu shen” 脩身).

45 *Xunzi* 2, 46.

46 *Xunzi* 2, 71.

47 *Xunzi* 2, 49. The paragraph which begins with this sentence has a close textual parallel in *Hanshi waizhuan* 1, 25. This version contains the variant *yang xing* 養性 for *yang sheng* 養生.

The text "Xiu shen" differentiates between physiological practices, which increase longevity, and the cultivation of one's moral character, which results in social recognition and political success. This appears to be the only text in the edited literature where control of *qi* and *xiu shen* are mentioned together. The effects of these respective techniques are nothing less than spectacular, for they promise to put the practitioner on a par with mythical figures of the distant past. They are not, however, overtly linked to any metaphysical or spiritual tenets. Nor are they of equal value. Moral cultivation is inextricably intertwined with ritual propriety. The latter, and moral cultivation more generally, is a precondition for the application of physiological techniques, both logically and in practical terms.

凡用血氣、志意、知慮，由禮則治通，不由禮則勃亂提慢；食飲、衣服、居處、動靜，由禮則和節，不由禮則觸陷生疾；容貌、態度、進退、趨行，由禮則雅，不由禮則夷固、僻違、庸眾而野。故人無禮則不生，事無禮則不成，國家無禮則不寧。

If your exertions of blood, *qi*, intentions and conscious mind, knowledge and thought accord with ritual, they will be ordered and effective. If they do not accord with ritual, they will be disorderly and unproductive. If your meals, clothing, dwelling, and activities accord with ritual, they will be congenial and well-regulated. If they do not accord with ritual, you will encounter dangers and illnesses. If your countenance, bearing, movements, and stride accord with ritual, they will be graceful. If they do not accord with ritual, they will be barbaric, obtuse, perverse, vulgar and unruly.⁴⁸

The primacy of ritual is re-emphasised later in the chapter, toward the conclusion of a section which discusses in considerable detail the application of a related set of techniques.

凡治氣養心之術，莫徑由禮，莫要得師，莫神一好。

Generally, in controlling one's *qi* and nurturing the heart there is nothing swifter than ritual propriety; nothing more essential than obtaining a teacher; and nothing more miraculous than unifying one's preferences.⁴⁹

Despite overlaps in terminology – "controlling the *qi*" and "nurturing", either "life" or the "heart" – the main concern in this section of "Xiu shen" differs from the one previously cited, which promises to confer longevity greater than Pengzu's. In the present passage, the described techniques are concerned with fine-tuning one's mind or personality rather

The sentences quoted are open to a number of different interpretations depending on whether one reads *bian* 遍 [*pên?] (~遍 / 徧 [*pêns]) "everywhere" or 偏 (~辨 [*brēn?]) "to distinguish, differentiate" (see Wang Tianhai 2005, 50 n. 1); and whether one understands *bian shan zhi du* 偏善之度 syntactically as the proposed object of the following two instances of *yi* 以, as in the translation above, or as a topic: "As for all-around goodness: ..."

48 *Xunzi* 2, 49. Translation modified from Hutton 2014, 10.

49 *Xunzi* 2, 55.

than with the physical survival of the body. For instance, the text recommends, among other things, the following:

血氣剛強，則柔之以調和；知慮漸深，則一之以易良；勇膽猛戾，則輔之以道順。

If your blood and *qi* are strong and unyielding, soften them with harmony. If your consciousness and thoughts sink to ever greater profundities, unify them with what is good and easy. If your valorous spirits become too ferocious, stabilise them with guidance and conformity.⁵⁰

The aim of such advice is to assist in mental self-regulation by prescribing means to dampen extreme emotions and dispositions. The following paragraph, which speaks about the “cultivation” of one’s “mind and intentions”, summarises these techniques. Mental discipline, it argues, allows one to shake off restrictions imposed by the external world. “Xiu shen” makes a similar point with a turn of phrase that evokes ascetic self-abnegation.

志意脩則驕富貴，道義重則輕王公；內省而外物輕矣。傳曰：「君子役物，小人役於物。」此之謂矣。

If the conscious mind and intentions are cultivated, one will be blasé about riches and high status. If the way and righteousness are accorded great weight, one will take lightly kings and dukes. If one’s interiority is inspected, external things weigh lightly.

One tradition says: “The noble man puts external things in his service; the petty man is in the service of external things.” That is what it refers to.⁵¹

As the subsequent statements on “serving” different types of “rulers” (事亂君而通，不如事窮君而順焉) indicate,⁵² these particular remarks address those who are intent on getting involved in politics. The same seems to hold true for the entire text, which offers those pursuing an official career the requisite conceptual framework, motivation, and moral standards, though certainly according to a rigorous moral code and not at all costs.

The text’s didactic intent explains its strong reliance on contrast, classification, and repetition. The juxtaposition of noble man and petty man presents a clichéd opposition between positive and negative personality traits.⁵³ Positive and negative features, affirmation and negation, are contrasted elsewhere in more variegated ways, for example, in the

50 Ibid.

51 *Xunzi* 2, 55. Both *Huainan zi* 淮南子 and *Wenzi* 文子 repeatedly caution against “turning one’s person into a slave to things” (*yi shen yi wu* 以身役物). However, see also the chapter “Shan mu” 山木 in *Zhuangzi*, where Master Zhuang recommends, in a similar vein, “to treat things as things instead of being treated by things as a thing” (*wu wu er bu wu yu wu* 物物而不物於物). *Zhuangzi* 20, 720.

52 *Xunzi* 2, 55.

53 *Xunzi* 2, 46, 55.

claims about the respective consequences of adhering to and neglecting ritual propriety (*you li* 由禮, *bu you li* 不由禮; see above).⁵⁴ Entire paragraphs are organised around comparable oppositions. In what might be viewed as a summary of a whole range of conducts and personality types, positive cases are confronted with negative counterparts.

以善先人者謂之教，以善和人者謂之順；以不善先人者謂之諂，以不善和人者謂之諛。是是非非謂之智，非是是非謂之愚。

To lead others in what is good is called "teaching." To harmonize with others in what is good is called "proper compliance."

To lead others along in what is bad is called "flattery." To harmonize with others in what is bad is called "toadying."

To endorse what is right and condemn what is wrong is called "wisdom." To endorse what is wrong and condemn what is right is called "stupidity."⁵⁵

In addition to the prevailing antithetical structure of the paragraph, the pointed repetition of definitions stands out. The pattern continues throughout the remainder with its tetrasyllabic statements of the form XY *yue* 曰 Z. For example, we read: "Stealing riches is called 'robbery'" (*qie huo yue dao* 竊貨曰盜).⁵⁶ In view of its stylistic monotony, the paragraph appears to have been composed by someone aiming to arrive at an exhaustive and easy to memorise litany.⁵⁷ A similar case of stylistic repetition can be found in one of the subsequent paragraphs. Here, the exposition is organised around contrasting examples:

體恭敬而心忠信，術禮義而情愛人；橫行天下，雖困四夷，人莫不貴。勞苦之事則爭先，饒樂之事則能讓，端慤誠信，拘守而詳；橫行天下，雖困四夷，人莫不任。體倨固而心欺詐，術順墨而精雜汙；橫行天下，雖達四方，人莫不賤。勞苦之事則偷儒轉脫，饒樂之事則佞兌而不曲，辟違而不慤，程役而不錄；橫行天下，雖達四方，人莫不棄。

54 *Xunzi* 2, 49.

55 *Xunzi* 2, 49; tr. from Hutton 2014, 11.

56 *Xunzi* 2, 50.

57 On lists in ancient Chinese texts, see Gentz 2015. Uses and organisational principles of lists are manifold. On lexical lists in Mesopotamia and how the productivity of their generative principles caused them to assume a life of their own, see ch. 2–3 in Van de Mierop 2016, esp. 64–65 on the proliferation of "lexical fantasies" and the nature of such lists as "studies of the written word" rather than "scientific inquiry into reality". For a more detailed discussion, including a lengthy refutation of Wolfram von Soden's (1908–1996) *Listenwissenschaft* (briefly rejected by Van de Mierop 2016, 65) and a discussion of the rhizomatic character of Mesopotamian epistemology, see Hilgert 2009. On literary and nonliterary lists generally, see Belknap 2004, ch.1.

If your bearing is reverent and respectful and your heart is loyal and trustworthy, if your method consists in ritual propriety and dutifulness and your disposition is such as to be concerned for others, then you may traverse the world, and even if you become trapped among the barbarians of the four [directions], no one will fail to value you. If you are eager to take the lead in laborious matters, if you can give way in pleasant matters, and if you show scrupulousness, honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, self-control and meticulousness, then you may traverse the whole world, and even if you become trapped among the barbarians of the four [directions], no one will fail to employ you.

If your bearing is arrogant and obtuse and your heart is stubborn and deceitful, if your method is to follow Mozi and your truest essence is polluted and corrupt, then you may traverse the whole world, and even if you are successful in all four directions, no one will fail to consider you base. If you try to put off or wriggle out of laborious matters, if you are grasping and will not yield in pleasant matters, if you are perverse and dishonest, if you are not meticulous in work, then you may traverse the whole world, and even if you are successful in all four directions, no one will fail to reject you.⁵⁸

The good man will prosper “even if trapped among the barbarians of the four [directions]” (*sui kun si yi* 雖困四夷); the bad one will ultimately fail “even if successful in all four directions” (*sui da si fang* 雖達四方). Both types of men will get their just deserts, irrespective of whether the circumstances initially suggest this. Whilst there is subtle variation in the formulaic style of the passage, it hardly alleviates the mantra-like repetitiveness. The main goal it is to hammer home a simple point: Being good leads to acceptance and success; being bad, to rejection (the very notion contested by Wang Chong).

In sum, “Xiu shen” covers a range of topics related to the concept “self-cultivation”: the dependency of moral goodness on a combination of constructive social interactions and self-examination; the importance of metaphorical and actual teachers as critics and instructors; and, finally, the foundational role of ritual propriety for both moral self-perfection and physiological techniques for attaining longevity. This last point is remarkable since techniques of controlling *qi* are not frequently mentioned in close proximity to the term *xiu shen*. It would seem as if “Xiu shen” assimilates a range of ideas into its presentation of “self-cultivation”, all the while maintaining the logical priority and practical superiority of a preferred set of tenets and practices.

This text, moreover, has an air of the “how-to” manual, for its design is based on the pervasive use of contrast, antithesis, and exhaustive classification. The guidelines for mood

58 *Xunzi* 2, 61; translation adapted from Hutton 2014, 12–13. Compare the translation of *sui da si fang* 雖達四方, which Hutton renders as “even if you reach every corner of it [i. e., the world]”. As Wang Tianhai 2005, 63 n. 6, points out, a contrast is probably intended between “trapped” (*kun* 困) and *da*, which Wang translates as *xian da* 顯達 “illustrious and successful”.

regulation are only the tip of the iceberg, didactically speaking. In all likelihood, the person to be cultivated according to the guidelines of this short treatise is an aspiring official who combines an independent mind with mental self-control and a good sense of what kind of personality is required for a successful career.

4 Recluses and Rejects: Self-Cultivation and Humble Status

In the texts discussed so far, self-cultivation features as an intrinsic factor for turning a man into a morally superior candidate for office and for nurturing a sage as a moral lodestar for the people of his state, if not the entire realm. The present section discusses self-cultivation as a practice adhered to by individuals who find themselves on the lower levels of the social order and who are, consequently, cut off from the sources of power, though they might be open to, or ultimately aspire to engage in, political activity.

In the *Debates on Salt and Iron*, one of the exponents of the literati faction argues that inner qualities and worldly success are not correlated in a straightforward manner. This issue had also already been discussed by Wang Chong.

夫賤不害智，貧不妨行。顏淵屢空，不為不賢。孔子不容，不為不聖。必將以貌舉人，以才[~財]進士，則太公終身鼓刀，寧戚不離飯牛矣。

古之君子，守道以立名，修身以俟時，不為窮變節，不為賤易志，惟仁之處，惟義之行。臨財苟得，見利反義，不義而富，無名而貴，仁者不為也。

Being of lowly status is not detrimental to one's intelligence; poverty is no hindrance to proper conduct. Yan Yuan was often out of means, but that does not mean he was not worthy. Master Kong found no acceptance, but that does not mean he was no sage. If one were unfailingly to appoint men according to their appearance and to promote officers according to their wealth, then the Great Duke would still be chopping around with his knife, and Ning Qi would not have moved on from feeding oxen.

The noble men of old preserved the Way in order to establish a reputation, and they cultivated their persons in order to await the right time. They would make no changes to their moral steadfastness because they were reduced to extremity. Nor would they alter their intentions because of their lowly status. By benevolence alone they would abide; only acts which are right they would carry out. To casually gather up riches upon encountering them; to turn what is right on its head when he spots advantages; to grow rich by improper means and to attain nobility without a reputation – a benevolent man will do none of these.⁵⁹

The literatus sketches out an idealised picture of how steadfast the ancient paragons of virtue were in their adherence to moral standards. These men, he avers, first and foremost focussed on themselves in order to hone their moral qualities. Their success, or lack there-

59 *Yantie lun* 4.16, 209 ("Di guang" 地廣).

of, did not reflect negatively on their character or their talents. Accordingly, the literatus suggests disregarding signs of failure when selecting officials. If one exclusively “appoints men according to their appearance and promotes officers according to their wealth”, the services of many gifted individuals will be lost to the state. This, then, is the issue at stake, not to find excuses for instances of failure.

In contradistinction to the ruler of the *Zhongyong* and *Daxue*, the paragons named here initially have no realistic hope that their virtue will ever radiate outwards and exert its transformative effects across the state or the entire realm. If they doggedly adhere to their mental and moral discipline, they do so despite their disreputable occupations as dog butchers and cowherds who must contend with social isolation and political impotence, not because their moral steadfastness will benefit the world at large. The speech also posits a noble refusal on the recluses’ part to compromise their moral integrity in order to improve their station. If anything, the remoteness of these men from riches, power, and recognition makes them even more determined in their pursuit of virtue. Such disdain for worldly recognition does not, however, translate into a blanket refusal to enter official service. On the contrary, self-cultivation is what helps these men to prepare for office – they devote themselves to it “in order to await the right time.” Nonetheless, they do so entirely on their own terms, staying true only to their unbending moral standards.

A similar constellation appears, though in a different context and with divergent connotations, in a story about Hou Ying 侯嬴. Hou Ying was a follower of Wuji, Prince of Wei (魏公子無忌), one of the “four princes of the Warring States period” (*zhanguo si gongzi* 戰國四公子), who were famed for their largesse in supporting talented retainers. The passage in question draws once again on the motif of rejected advances. Specifically, the socially inferior future retainer declines the generosity of his prospective patron in order to test the latter’s sincerity.

魏有隱士曰侯嬴，年七十，家貧，為大梁夷門監者。公子聞之，往請，欲厚遺之。不肯受，曰：「臣修身絜行數十年，終不以監門困故而受公子財。」

In Wei there was a recluse called Hou Ying, who was seventy years old and a guard at the Yi Gate in Daliang. When the prince heard of him, he went to invite him and wanted to amply reward him. [But Hou Ying] refused, saying: “Your subject has for several decades cultivated his person and purified his conduct and won’t ever accept Your Highness’ wealth out of weariness over guarding the gate.”⁶⁰

Whilst Hou Ying’s persona as a stubborn recluse conforms to a common trope, his statements about his own morality are remarkable. He holds an official post, though one of the lowliest possible. This implies that the term recluse is used in this case for someone who does not seek recognition, as opposed to someone who shuns official employment of any

60 *Shiji* 77, 2378.

kind. Hou Ying refers to his practices as *xiu shen*. Given that this term is sometimes used with reference to the moral and ritual observances of the ruler, this may serve to highlight the claim conveyed by the very motif of rejected advances that moral excellence trumps social status and political power.

In this historical narrative, the frame of reference diverges from the speech of the literatus in the *Debates*, where the moral paragons of the past engage in self-cultivation in order to prepare the appropriate moment to enter the service of the rightful monarch. Hou Ying becomes a client of a noble who holds a domain, not an official who serves a ruler of state. One may suspect that a sense of political legitimacy, however attenuated, accompanied the moral self-discipline of the *Debates'* paragons. From a centralised perspective on political normativity, such a moral scaffolding would be difficult to construe in the case of the reclusive gatekeeper who ends up joining a band of mercenary retainers.

In the *Debates* as well as in the anecdote about Hou Ying, self-cultivation enters the debate as an attribute of a reclusive lifestyle, but also as one which leaves open the possibility of political involvement. The following passage from *Huainan zi*, however, counsels against any such entanglements.

為善則觀，為不善則議；觀則生貴，議則生患。故道術不可以進而求名，而可以退而修身；不可以得利，而可以離害。故聖人不以行求名，不以智見譽。法修自然，已無所與。

If you do good, you will be admired.

If you do ill, you will be criticized.

Admiration generates honor.

Criticism generates resentment.

Thus the Techniques of the Way
cannot be used to advance and seek a reputation
but can be used to retreat and cultivate one's person.
They cannot be used to obtain benefit
but can be used to distance oneself from harm.

Thus the sage
does not rely on his conduct to seek a reputation,
does not rely on his knowledge to demonstrate his praiseworthiness.

He imitates and complies with the natural world so that nothing interferes with him.⁶¹

The literatus of the *Debates* stressed that a virtuous man will not allow himself to be raised to a noble status if he lacks a commensurate reputation (無名而貴，仁者不為也). But this is a contingent qualification. From the literatus' perspective, a good name and the

61 *Huainan zi* 14, 1484–1485 (“Quan yan xun” 詮言訓), tr. by Sarah A. Queen in Major 2010, 14.23, 548.

resulting increase in status are still something to aspire to, albeit in an honourable manner and not at any cost. This is consistent with the fact that the literatus' viewpoint is aligned with interest of the state to select suitable functionaries. Moral integrity, in short, makes for honest officials. The *Huainan zi*, by contrast, urges utter withdrawal. Its brand of self-cultivation is intrinsically bound to a rejection of worldly involvement, which, whether or not it is successful, would inevitably cause harm. Fame increases a person's visibility and opens him up to attack. Hence moral self-perfection is not possible without reclusion, a practice that shields one from harm. The sage of this *Huainan zi* passage is, in a crucial respect, the obverse of the virtuous ruler in *Daxue* and *Zhongyong*, whose presence at the apex of power causes order to spread outwards and percolate downwards. The sage of the *Huainan zi* completely removes himself from the scene; he focusses entirely on himself.

5 Worldly Precepts? Codes of Conduct and Practical Wisdom

The sources reviewed so far treat of subjects engaged in self-cultivation who occupy different sociopolitical positions. They variously speak to those directly involved in governing; to those who maintain an uneasy, yet potentially flexible distance from power; and to those who opt for a complete withdrawal from the world, caring exclusively for their own wellbeing. There are texts which use the term *xiu shen* in order to impart practical wisdom on how to negotiate social life – as Wang Chong did – on a level somewhere in between the exalted position of monarch and the self-effacing existence of the recluse. The following passage from *Hanshi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳, which appears to weave together several maxims using rhyme and assonance, is a case in point.

脩身不可不慎也：嗜慾侈則行虧，讒毀行則害成；患生於忿怒，禍起於纖微 [*mɔi, LH: *mɔi]; 汗辱難湔灑，敗失不復追 [*trui, LH: *tɔi]。不深念遠慮，後悔何益！微幸者、伐性之斧 [*paʔ] 也，嗜慾者、逐禍之馬 [*mrâʔ] 也，謾誕者、趨禍之路 [*râkʰ] 也，毀於人者、困窮之舍 [*lhah] 也。

是故君子不微幸，節嗜慾，務忠信，無毀於一人，則名聲尚尊，稱為君子矣。
《詩》曰：「何其處兮，必有與也。」

One cannot but be cautious in cultivating one's person. If desires and appetites luxuriate, one's conduct will suffer; if slander and defamations spread, harm will materialise. Calamity is born from fury; misfortune arises from trifles and subtleties. Disgrace and shame are hard to wash away; defeat and failure cannot be remedied at their source. What good does it do to feel regret if one fails to ponder deeply and think far ahead? Reliance on luck is the axe that fells one's character; desires and appetites are horses racing to catch up with disaster. Indulgence is the road along which one hurtles towards disaster; defamation is an abode which reduces one to extremity.

Thus, the noble man does not rely on luck, moderates his desires and appetites, and devotes himself to loyalty and trustworthiness that he be not defamed by a single man. And so his reputation will be respected and one will designate him a noble man.

The *Ode* says: "Why do they rest without stirring?/ It must be they expect allies."⁶²

This passage surely addressed an elite audience with some literary education. However, there is no indication that it was composed in reference to the intrinsic needs of upper-class life. A good deal of the advice comes down to straightforward warnings about how to avoid negative experiences resulting from inadequate emotional self-regulation, an issue that is also discussed in the "Xiu shen" chapter of the *Xunzi*. The main advice concerns moderation, the avoidance of strong, potentially disruptive emotions and – in clear contradistinction to Wang Chong's historically later, sceptical stance – farsighted calculations as a means to avert misfortune. The consequences of failed self-cultivation are not articulated in overtly political terms, and the perspective and scope of the text are focused on individuals of indistinct political position and social status.

Some of the rhyming couplets may have been sayings in popular circulation. The metaphorical warnings of "the axe that fells one's character" and the "horses racing to catch up with disaster" suggest proverbial wisdom. Only the repeated insistence on the control of affects hints at a potential link to religious and ritual conceptions of self-cultivation with their purification exercises, but it is weak at best. Nothing suggests an interest in strictly ritualistic forms of self-discipline. It is more likely that self-cultivation in the present case is integrated into a common-sense approach to the moderation of emotions and desires and to the creation and maintenance of constructive social interactions. Such an approach is not restricted to any particular level of society. Self-cultivation is assimilated to the quotidian, turning into a set of maxims which promise no greater power than the ability to avoid unpleasantness.

Self-cultivation could also be more specifically applied to a particular class, the "men of service" (*shi* 士). They were the lower nobles of the Warring States era, predestined by their talent and education to fill official posts. Under the same designation, they laid claim to political power in the early empire and beyond. In a chapter which stresses the importance of virtuous and benevolent rule, the compendium *Guanzi* presents self-cultivation as the specific task of the *shi*. After listing "five duties" (*wu wu* 五務) and their positive impact at different levels of the social and political hierarchy, the text continues:

62 *Hanshi waizhuan* 9, 795; cf. the translation in Hightower 1952, 308. Note also the parallel version in *Shuoyuan* 10, 262 ("Jing shen" 敬慎). The *Odes* quotation is from *Mao shi* 毛詩 no. 37, 2nd stanza (Legge, *She King*, 60). The Mao commentary interprets this as a song of complaint about the failure of Wei 衛 to come to the support of Li 黎. See Legge, *ibid.*, fn.; Wang Xianqian 1987, 181–182.

君擇臣而任官，大夫任官辦事，官長任事守職，士修身功材，庶人耕農樹藝。

君擇臣而任官，則事不煩亂。大夫任官辦事，則舉措時。官長任事守職，則動作和。士修身功材，則賢良發。庶人耕農樹藝，則財用足。

The prince selects ministers to take charge of offices. Great ministers take charge of offices and discuss affairs. The heads of offices take charge of affairs and attend to their responsibilities. The men of service engage in self-cultivation and perfect their talents. The common people engage in agriculture and horticulture.

When the prince selects ministers to take charge of offices, there is no confusion in [the handling of] his affairs. When great ministers take charge of offices and discuss affairs, whatever they undertake will be timely. When the heads of offices take charge of affairs and attend to their responsibilities, whatever they do will be in accord [with their instructions]. When the men of service engage in self-cultivation and perfect their talents, the worthy and good emerge. When the common people engage in agriculture and horticulture, [the state's] fiscal resources are sufficient.⁶³

Like the introductory section of the *Daxue*, this passage defines remits of varying scope for rulers, their high-ranking ministers, lower functionaries, and commoners. Other parts of the same chapter seek to inculcate in the ruler the paramount importance of virtuous rule. But the present passage sets out functions and procedures: While the ruler, his ministers, and high-ranking bureaucrats fulfil their duties to keep the administrative machinery operational, the responsibility for moral self-monitoring devolves upon the *shi*. In stark contrast to other texts, it is the task of those in the ranks of the bureaucracy to improve their moral qualities and refine their skills, whereas those of commoner status are not expected to do much more than plough the fields and occasionally go to war.

This vision of the state sets great store on the efficacy of selecting personnel (the ruler's task) and carrying out duties in accordance with official standards (the task of the ministers and high officials). It entails a procedural vision which dispenses entirely with any moral or charismatic factors such as the radiant virtue of the prince. Notably, however, the *shi* in particular are singled out as bearers of moral responsibility. This may be seen as a sign of "the strong sense of self-respect" which, according to Yuri Pines, emerged in the Warring States period among those who belonged to this "newly rising stratum, who accepted their mission to improve governance above and public mores below, and who considered themselves spiritual leaders of the society."⁶⁴ "Intellectually active *shi*", Pines remarks, "attained their intellectual/moral autonomy of and superiority to the throne with almost unbelievable ease."⁶⁵ The unique moral responsibility the *Guanzi* accords to

63 *Guanzi* 10, 198–199 ("Wu fu" 五輔); translation modified from Rickett 1985, 198.

64 Pines 2009, 121.

65 Pines 2009, 125.

this group appears to be based on precisely such a sense of superiority. It is also reflected in the five virtues Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145?–86? BCE) lists in his “Letter to Ren An” (“Bao Ren An shu” 報任安書):

僕聞之，修身者智之府也，愛施者仁之端也，取予者義之符也，恥辱者勇之決也，立名者行之極也。士有此五者，然後可以託於世，列於君子之林矣。

I heard this: A person cultivated is a storehouse of knowledge. Fondness of giving is a first sprout of humaneness. What one accepts or offers tallies with his sense of propriety. A sense of shame and humiliation decides over one’s courage. To establish a reputation is the acme of one’s conduct. Only a gentleman who has these five [virtues] can assume a place in the world and rank among the noble men.⁶⁶

A very similar list also appears in *Zhongyong* and in one of the miscellaneous chapters of the *Shuoyuan* 說苑, though, significantly, without the reference to *shi*. Sima Qian’s statement – perhaps not coincidentally prefaced by “I heard this” – thus appear like an attempt to promote the self-image of his own class by appropriating a pre-existing definition of crucial virtues.⁶⁷

A passage from *Hanshi waizhuan* provides further hints that self-cultivation was, at least to some, part of a code of conduct for *shi*. The evidence is finally ambiguous, however. Here, Confucius’s famously combative and impetuous disciple Zilu 子路 enunciates his ideal of a proper *shi*.

士不能勤苦，不能輕死亡，不能恬貧窮，而曰我行義，吾不信也。

I do not trust a man of service who says: “I do what is right!”, whilst being incapable of self-exertion and hardship, of taking death lightly, and of remaining impassive in poverty and distress.⁶⁸

Zilu advocates an uncompromising vision of *shi* honour that is anchored in self-denial, a capacity for suffering, and the willingness to sacrifice one’s own life. This is followed by several examples (still in Zilu’s voice) of noble conduct, an *Odes* quotation hailing an exemplary man, and a final statement on Zilu’s words. The latter establishes a connection between Zilu’s code and self-cultivation.

非良篤修身行之君子，其孰能與之哉

Who, if not a respectable and devoted noble man engaged in cultivation of his person and conduct, could partake [of such praise as voiced in the *Odes*]?⁶⁹

66 *Hanshu* 62, 2727.

67 For the other occurrences, see above, fn. 25.

68 *Hanshi waizhuan* 2, 200; see the translation in Hightower 1952, 64–65. Cf. the parallel in *Shuoyuan* 4, 77–78.

The text claims that a *shi* who adheres to such a stern code of service can be considered a moral exemplar of the highest order, and that his qualities are the fruit of a single-minded practice of moral discipline. Unfortunately, although suggestive, the textual basis for this understanding is open to doubt.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, a clearer indication of the link between self-cultivation and *shi* honour is provided in a speech attributed to the mother of a venal chancellor of the state of Qi 齊 in Liu Xiang's 劉向 (79–8 BCE) *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳.

吾聞士脩身潔行，不為苟得 [*tək]。竭情盡實 [*m-lit]，不行詐偽。非義之事 [*dzrəʔ]，不計於心。非理之利 [*rih]，不入 [~納] 於家。言行若一 [*ʔit]，情貌相副。 [*p(h)rək]

I have heard that a man of service cultivates himself and purifies his conduct, and does not involve himself in ill-gotten gain. He exhausts all efforts to be truthful and does not carry out deceptions. If something is not right, he does not scheme about it in his heart. If a profit comes through unprincipled means, he does not accept it in his house. His words and actions are one, and his thoughts and outward appearance are in accord.⁷¹

Like the tetrasyllabic metre and the rhymes and assonances, the mother's claim to have *heard* these precepts elsewhere suggests that the passage quotes traditional wisdom, possibly well-known verses on moral conduct. Some of the values propounded in these precepts, such as imperviousness to material temptations, ring familiar. They appear, for instance, in the “Xiu shen” chapter in the *Xunzi* and in the literatus' speech in the *Debates on Salt and Iron*. Other values, such as the close correspondence between mental states and outward appearance and, hence, the transparency of the former to external observers, are novel and reflect a more profound commitment to moral and emotional self-discipline.

If we regard this passage and the *Lienü zhuan* as a whole as representative of prevailing attitudes in Liu Xiang's own time, the notion that aspiring officials should engage in self-cultivation to prepare themselves for their career might, at this point, have been par for the course. Elsewhere in the book, a desperate wife berates her corrupt official husband, reminding him of his moral purity at the outset of his career: “You bound up your hair [as a sign of reaching adulthood], engaged in self-cultivation, and took leave from your kin to go away and enter official service” (子束髮脩身，辭親往仕)⁷² Whilst the

69 *Hanshi waizhuan* 2, 200. The *Odes* quotation is from *Mao Shi* no. 117 (Legge, *She King*, 179).

70 The *Shuoyuan* version has *xiu ji* 修激 instead of *xiu shen*. See also the notes on variants in Qu's edition and Hightower's translation.

71 *Lienü zhuan* 1.14, 70 (“Qi Tian Ji mu” 齊田稷母). Translation modified from Kinney 2014, 1.14, 24 (“The Mother of Tian Ji of Qi”).

72 *Lienü zhuan* 5.9, 261 (“Lu Qiu jie fu” 魯秋潔婦); cf. the translation in Kinney 2014, 5.9, 99 (“The Chaste Wife of Qiu of Lu”).

rhetorical intent is clear, there still might be a kernel of truth in this claim about the internalisation of moral and ideological norms.

At the personal level, the practice of self-cultivation as part of a code of conduct is ultimately a matter of choice. Of course, one can certainly imagine collective norms and self-imposed pressures nudging members of the *shi* class against their own inclination to engage in such practices or profess the values that undergird them. Nevertheless, the choice was theirs to make.

In a different realm of ideological discourse, it was also possible to employ the notion of self-cultivation for more pernicious ends. A chapter in *Han Fei zi* 韓非子 on "suspicion" (*yi* 疑) as an instrument of political control to be utilised by the ruler lists "five kinds of traitors" (*wu jian* 五姦). In general, such men surreptitiously enhance their standing and conspire to win the loyalty of the population in order to realise their selfish aims. Capable rulers stop these schemers in their tracks and ensure that no one else at court dares to lie or plot. As a result,

群臣居則修身，動則任力，非上之令、不敢擅作疾言誣事，此聖王之所以牧臣下也。

all the ministers will cultivate their persons when dwelling in their abode and fully exert their powers when active. Without orders from above, they will not dare to take it upon themselves to act, speak ill, or distort matters. This is how a sage king shepherds his ministers and inferiors.⁷³

Rather than being a voluntary choice born from insight into the intrinsic goodness of moral discipline, self-cultivation is practised out of a sense of intimidation in an atmosphere of pervasive distrust. This is consistent with the observation that Han Fei was "not really a cultivationist at all" but rather considered humans to be essentially self-interested and believed "that in all but the most rare of cases, this aspect of human nature could not be fundamentally altered or ameliorated."⁷⁴ For those living in the state envisioned by Han Fei, staying on the straight and narrow is not a lofty ideal to aspire to – it is the only way to escape punishment. For the ministers and officials in such a system, devotion to moral discipline is merely a means of self-preservation.

In a different chapter of *Han Fei zi*, officials are pressed to engage in self-cultivation as a necessary mode of conduct. A good ruler, Han Fei accordingly argues, ensures that ministers follow certain behavioural norms, whilst an inept ruler fails to impose any limits whatever on his ministers' selfish impulses.

73 *Han Fei zi* 44, 1104 ("Shuo yi" 說疑).

74 Ivanhoe 2011, 36.

人臣有私心，有公義。修身潔白而行公行正，居官無私，人臣之公義也。汙行從欲，安身利家，人臣之私心也。明主在上則人臣去私心行公義，亂主在上則人臣去公義行私心，故君臣異心。

Among ministers one finds selfish intentions as well as public-minded dutifulness. The public-minded dutifulness of the minister consists in self-cultivation and purification so as to carry out what is in the public interest and what is right, as well as in freedom from selfishness in office. The selfish intentions of the minister consist in dirty practices and giving free rein to his desires, in making his person comfortable and benefitting his house. If a perceptive ruler resides at the apex, ministers discard their selfish intentions and carry out their public duty. If a disorderly ruler resides at the apex, ministers discard public duty and carry out their selfish intentions. Hence rulers and ministers are of diverging intentions.⁷⁵

Self-cultivation for Han Fei has a purely instrumental value. In distinction to the *Zhongyong*, the ruler's moral and mental self-discipline is of no importance. What matters, instead, is the obligation devolved upon the ruler's servants, whose attempts at shaping their own person contribute to the stability of the political system. Forcing practices of self-cultivation on officials becomes a technique of rulership, and self-cultivation itself, stripped of all genuine moral content, is reduced to acquiescence in the existing system of rulership.

In the passages just quoted, self-cultivation is integrated into an ideology of authoritarian rule. By contrast, in the *Shang jun shu* 商君書, which is also interested in military and administrative efficiency, self-cultivation (termed simply "cultivation", *xiu* 修) is rejected outright. Here, it is seen as one of a series of values and practices that are detrimental to the military prowess of the state.

詩、書、禮、樂、善、修、仁、廉、辯、慧，國有十者，上無使守戰。國以十者治，敵至必削，不至必貧。

If, in a country, there are the following ten things: Odes and Documents, rites and music, goodness, cultivation, humaneness, integrity, sophistry and intelligence, then the ruler has no one whom he can employ for defence and warfare. If a state is governed by means of these ten things, it will be dismembered, as soon as an enemy approaches, and, even if no enemy approaches, it will be poor.⁷⁶

75 *Han Fei zi* 19, 344–345 (“Shi xie” 飾邪). Paul Goldin (2001) has argued that *gong* 公 and *si* 私 represent two sides of the same coin, the mutually antagonistic relationship between rulers and ministers. Thus, *si* stands for the self-interest of the minister, and *gong* for the self-interest of the ruler.

76 *Shang jun shu* 3, 23 (“Nong zhan” 農戰); translation slightly modified from Duyvendak 1928, 190. See also the similar passage in *Shang jun shu* 4, 29–30 (“Qu qiang” 去強, tr. Duy-

Whilst Han Fei nullifies the autonomous character of self-cultivation, turning it into a kind of quietistic, norm-following behaviour, moral self-discipline cannot be reconciled with the political vision of the *Shang jun shu* and ranks among a number of lethal heresies that threaten to upset the centralised chain of command simply by dint of the fact that they uphold values at odds with the maintainance of state power.

The ten detrimental factors of the *Shang jun shu*, some of which reappear in its list of "six fleas" (*liu shi* 六蟲), are characteristically Confucian.⁷⁷ To counter the influence of these factors, one needs to do away with them entirely – there is no room for accommodation or assimilation.

By contrast, a passage from "Against the Confucians", the *Mozi* 墨子 does not object to *xiu shen* per se, but rather turns the concept into a propagandistic weapon against those who typically promote it.

夫一道術學業，仁義也；皆大以治人 [*nin]，小以任官 [*kwàn]，遠施周偏 [*phen]，近以脩身 [*lhin / nhin]。不義不處，非理不行，務興天下之利，曲直周旋，[不]利則止，此君子之道也。以所聞孔某之行，則本與此相反謬也。」

Now, what unites the techniques of the way and the achievements of learning are humaneness and rectitude. They both serve, on the highest level, to govern others, or, on the lowest, to hold office. One shares them everywhere in the distance; closer to home, one uses them to cultivate one's person. If circumstances disagree with rectitude, one does not stay; one does not carry out what is against the proper order. One should be devoted to raising benefits for the realm, pursuing them whether one encounters right or wrong, and if something is of no benefit, stop. This is the way of the noble man. According to what one hears about the conduct of Kong so-and-so, however, it is fundamentally at odds with this.⁷⁸

Here, the *Mozi* pursues its own rhetorical strategy. It neither transforms nor rejects the practice of *xiu shen* or the values on which it is based. On the contrary, it affirms them, while claiming that a hypocritical Confucius actually acts against the values he promotes so vigorously. Besides Han Fei's own ideological utilisation of *xiu shen*, this propagandistic appropriation may count as one of the most transparently strategic applications of the term. The issues addressed in each of the three texts – *Han Fei zi*, *Shang jun shu*, and *Mozi* – significantly transcend questions of moral self-discipline. The term *xiu shen* is, rather,

vendak 1928, 199–200). For a comparable list of noxious influences, though one that refers to kinds of persons, see also *Han Fei zi* 49 ("Wu du" 五蟲, "The Five Pests").

77 See *Shang jun shu* 13, 80 ("Le ling" 勒令; tr. Duyvendak 1928, 256).

78 *Mozi* 39, 296–298 ("Fei ru xia" 非儒下).

taken up in the context of more wide-ranging debates about the role of virtues in politics and the honesty of the Confucians.

The use of *xiu shen* in codes of conduct and the cut and thrust of political debate raise the question of whether the term is better understood here and elsewhere in the sense of “self-discipline” or “self-control” in a decidedly non-ritualistic, secular sense. Several other uses of the term do indeed suggest this. In his *Qianfu lun* 潛夫論, Wang Fu 王符 (ca. 90–165 CE) criticises frequent amnesties. In his opinion, clemency only causes more harm to law-abiding subject because it encourages criminals to pursue their evil ways even more brazenly.

孝悌之家，脩身慎行，不犯上禁，從生至死，無銖兩罪；數有赦贖，未嘗蒙恩，常反為禍。

Families who are filial and fraternal cultivate their persons and are cautious of their conduct. They do not act against imperial prohibitions, and from birth to death they do not incur the slightest guilt. When there were frequent amnesties and opportunities for ransoming [criminals], they have never received clemency; on the contrary, [the amnesties] have regularly turned into disasters [for them].⁷⁹

As in this passage, the link between self-cultivation and a sense of familial obligation is also emphasised in *Zhongyong*, and repeatedly so. The present passage, however, contrasts families engaging in self-cultivation with ordinary criminals. The families’ distinguishing quality is not necessarily their adherence to the highest possible moral standards, but more likely their general willingness to respect the law. Law-abiding subjects do not benefit from imperial clemency because they have no need for it. One senses, in the present case, that those who “cultivate their persons and are cautious of their conduct” are simply law-abiding people rather than the paragons of yore showcased in other writings.

Such a mundane use of *xiu shen* is not peculiar to Wang Fu. As pointed out earlier, a similar understanding, in which *xiu shen* is grounded in an adherence to official duties, can also be found in Wang Chong’s *Lunheng*. Nonetheless, the application of *xiu shen* to norm-following behaviour in less than exalted positions originated much earlier, likely on the cusp of imperial unification, if not before.

今有人於此，修身會計則可恥，臨財物資盡 [~贖] 則為己，若此而富者，非盜則無所取。故榮富非自至也，緣功伐也。今功伐甚薄而所望厚，誣也；無功伐而求榮富，詐也；詐誣之道，君子不由。

Let there be someone to whom it is disgraceful to control his person and engage in reckoning, and who makes any riches and resources he encounters his own. One who becomes rich in such a way will not bring anything into his possession except by robbery.

79 *Qianfu lun* 16, 203 (“Shu she” 述赦).

Hence, riches and glory do not arrive all by themselves; they follow from achievements. Now, if someone's achievements are meagre but his expectations high, this will end in deception. If he seeks riches and glory without any achievement, this will end in fraud. The noble man does not follow the path of fraud and deception.⁸⁰

The illustration discusses a hypothetical person who considers it shameful (*ke chi* 可恥) to engage in "reckoning" (*kuaiji* 會計), an activity elsewhere referred to as the work of low-level officials.⁸¹ Both the close link between reckoning and *xiu shen* and the subsequent contrast with criminal behaviour suggest that *xiu shen* was understood to be a crucial aspect of proper conduct in office. Spurning such dutiful conduct out of a sense of entitlement would lead to a drop in moral standards, if not outright criminal behaviour.

In a similar vein, a passage in *Huainan zi* is consistent with the mundane understanding of *xiu shen*. The "Techniques of Rulership" outlines the drawbacks of harsh political measures.

為暴者，妄誅也。無罪者而死亡，行直而被刑，則修身者不勸善，而為邪者輕犯上矣。

"Committing violence" means to punish recklessly. When those who are innocent are put to death and those who act honestly are punished, then those who cultivate their persons are not encouraged to be good, and those who commit evil acts will look lightly on defying their superiors.⁸²

The distinction established here resembles the one in Wang Fu's essay to the extent that it contrasts those who engage in self-cultivation with those who commit crimes. In this particular usage, self-cultivation designates a willingness to adhere to ordinary legal norms rather than an engagement in ritual purification or the pursuit of transcendent values. Given its attestation across texts separated by centuries, this understanding must have existed alongside the more exalted characterisations of *xiu shen*, though likely as part of a separate discourse.

6 Political and Cosmic Order in *Zhuangzi* 13, "Tian Dao"

In *Zhuangzi* 莊子, we encounter self-cultivation in several contexts. It appears, for instance, as part of a fictional dialogue in which the recluse Master Guangcheng 廣成子 enlightens the Yellow Emperor about the principles of self-preservation and longevity.

80 *Lüshi chungiu* 13.6, 719.

81 See the discussion in Chen Qiyou 2002, 723, n. 14.

82 *Huainan zi* 9, 922 ("Zhu shu xun"); tr. modified from the one by Sarah A. Queen and John S. Major in Major 2010, 9.13, 306.

天地有官 [*kwân], 陰陽有藏 [*dzân], 慎守女身, 物將自壯 [*tsraŋh]。我守其一, 以處其和, 故我修身千二百歲矣, 吾形未嘗衰。

There are offices of Heaven and earth and depositories for *yin* and *yang*. Cautiously preserve your person, and external things will become strong by themselves. I preserved the One, I dwelt in harmony, thus I have been cultivating my person for one thousand two hundred years, and my body has never become frail.⁸³

In accordance with the master's insistent recommendations, the Yellow Emperor ultimately abdicates and retreats into solitude. The narrative is about reclusiveness and how the exclusive caring for one's own person leads to immortality or, at least, to a extremely prolonged lifespan. Unsurprisingly, in the *Zhuangzi* self-cultivation is a practice centred on the refusal to allow oneself to become entangled in worldly affairs.

In the chapter "Tian dao" 天道, however, which Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢 assumes to be "later than Mencius but earlier than Qin", we encounter a notion of self-cultivation that is closely linked to non-action and ideas about the cosmic order, though in ways that do not seem consistent with the previously quoted passage.⁸⁴ The text develops a vision of the state and of the respective roles of rulers, ministers, and the people that closely parallels certain traits of the "insidious syncretism" Paul Goldin identifies in the "Techniques of the Ruler" ("Zhu shu xun" 主術訓), chapter 9 of the *Huainan zi*.⁸⁵ Such an affinity with amoral principles and cold, calculating attitudes toward rulership and the ruled may have prompted Wang Fuzhi's 王夫之 (1619–1692) observation that the chapter seems to diverge from the usual point of view espoused by the *Zhuangzi* and, further, that it might have been composed by "men under the Qin or Han who studied the techniques of Huang [i. e., Huangdi 黃帝, the Yellow Emperor] and Lao [i. e., Laozi 老子] in order to seek patronage with rulers."⁸⁶ Modern scholars have pursued this hint. Liu Xiaogan in particular has argued that "Tian dao" forms part of a group of seven *Zhuangzi* chapters which advocate Huang-Lao thought.⁸⁷ Nonetheless, whilst Huang-Lao has become a much-discussed topic since the excavation in Mawangdui 馬王堆 (1973) of a group of

83 *Zhuangzi* 11, 390 ("Zai you" 在宥).

84 Liu 1994, 72. It is unclear what this assessment is based on. Moreover, it is important to note that attempts to date the compilation *Zhuangzi* or parts thereof are fraught with difficulties and need to be taken with a pinch of salt. See the extensive discussions in Klein 2011.

85 Goldin 1999.

86 Quoted in Wang Shumin 1999, 471.

87 See Chen and Sung 2015, 247. Liu Xiaogan (2012, 89–91) argues that *Zhuangzi* chapters 11–16 and 33 form a single group and that they promote uncommon ideas within the context of the *Zhuangzi* in that they advocate inaction on the part of the ruler but a proactive attitude of the minister. According to Liu (1994, 123–129), this agrees with "Huang-Lao thought".

texts controversially identified by some as “Four Canons of the Yellow Emperor” (*Huangdi si jing* 黃帝四經), the phenomenon has remained elusive for decades.⁸⁸ Scholars are still debating whether Huang-Lao was a Warring States school of thought (which may have formed in Qi 齊 or in Chu 楚), or a Han political faction, whether the identification of the manuscripts was correct, and what was the doctrinal content of Huang-Lao, assuming it was a well-defined doctrine.⁸⁹ In view of these unresolved puzzles, it seems prudent to bracket the question concerning the “Tian dao” chapter’s potential Huang-Lao affiliation, while acknowledging that some of the concepts and ideas which scholars tend to associate with Huang-Lao can indeed be identified in this text.

Shifting its focus almost imperceptibly between sages (*sheng* 聖) and rulers (*di wang* 帝王, “thearchs and kings”), the text starts out by establishing the “stillness” (*jing* 靜) of the sage’s heart/mind, which reflects like a mirror the entire world and all beings without distortion. It also claims that emptiness, solitude and non-action are the states to which sages and rulers adhere.⁹⁰ Non-action in particular, however, is best understood as a strategic concept in the sense propounded by several texts such as fragments of *Shenzi* 申子 or other writings attributed to Shen Buhai 申不害, and texts in *Han Fei zi*, and *Huainan zi*.

88 The identification is based on the record of a *Huangdi si jing* in four *pian* 篇 in *Hanshu* 30 (“Yiwen zhi” 藝文志); see Chen Guoqing 1983, 126.

89 Chen and Sung (2015) offer an up-to-date overview of previous scholarship as well as their assessment of what Huang-Lao was, namely a doctrine originating in the Warring States based on central tenets such as *wu wei* 無為, *fa* 法, and *xing ming* 刑名 as well as on ideals of self-cultivation expressed in such psychological terms as *xu* 虛 and *jing* 靜 (see Roth 1991 and 1999 on correspondences in *Guanzi*). For Hans van Ess (1993), Huang-Lao, which is not attested in any source predating Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 (145?–86? BCE) *Shiji*, is a factional label that Sima applies to Western Han court politics and one which, moreover, cuts across schematic classifications such as “Confucian”, “Daoist”, and “Legalist”. In a similar vein, Michael Loewe (1994, 381 and 390) voices his “concern [...] at the adoption of Huang Lao as a specific school of thought”, pointing out that many ideological disagreements of the Han cannot be easily mapped onto the traditional schema of philosophical schools. Paul van Els (2002, 5) notes in reference to the excavation of the so-called “Four Canons of the Yellow Emperor”: “after thirty years of research, important questions remain unanswered. Which ideas, texts, and historical persons can be associated with Huang-Lao? Did a distinct notion of Huang-Lao ever exist?” He concludes that it “may well be a futile effort” to try and identify “thinkers, texts, and ideas” which may be confidently assigned to Huang-Lao (*ibid.*, 17). Even Robin D. S. Yates, one of the translators of the so-called “Four Canons”, appears uncomfortable with the prevailing trend to attribute these writings to a Huang-Lao school. Instead, he proposes that some of them may have been composed by “Yin-Yang specialists”, though he accepts that the remaining ones were affiliated with Huang-Lao. See Yates 1997, 16, 28, 43.

90 *Zhuangzi* 13, 471.

It is a stratagem which the ruler applies to enforce order without exposing his own person or his true intentions.⁹¹ As the “Tian dao” chapter puts it:

靜則無為，無為也，則任事者責矣。

Still, they [i. e., the emperor, the king, and the sage] may rest in inaction; resting in inaction, they may demand success from those who are charged with activities.⁹²

This recalls Angus Graham’s characterisation of the ruler in *Han Fei zi* as “empty of thoughts, desires, partialities of his own, concerned with nothing in the situation but the ‘facts’”. “Inactive”, he merely reacts to his ministers’ activities and “rewards and punishes. His own knowledge, abilities, moral worth, warrior spirit, such as they may be, are wholly irrelevant; he simply performs his function in the impersonal mechanism of the state.”⁹³ This results in an “automatic social order parallel with that of Heaven and earth”,⁹⁴ in which the ruler, invisibly sequestered in his palace, arms himself with techniques of control and deception to acquire intelligence which confers on him an air of superhuman perspicacity.⁹⁵ Ruling the world requires one to be in accord with the cosmic order, to be in agreement with changes of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽, and to understand “Heaven’s joy” (*tian le* 天樂). A man capable of this will also exert control over his mind: “With his unified mind in repose, he is king of the world.” (一心定而王天下)⁹⁶ However, despite such observations on the cosmic dimensions of rulership, which are partly attributed to Master Zhuang, much of what the text has to say about governance is far more practical and couched in the language of those thinkers who have, rightly or wrongly, come to be termed “Legalists”.⁹⁷

The ruler’s inaction guarantees material abundance, but it is the ruler alone who must remain inactive. Among subjects, there is a tendency to imitate the non-action of the ruler. But doing so would be a mistake: “Superiors must adopt inaction and make the world work for them; inferiors must adopt action and work for the world.” (上必無為而

91 See Goldin 1999, 166–172. On Shen Buhai and the *Shenzi* fragments, see Creel 1974.

92 *Zhuangzi* 13, 471; tr. Watson 1968, 142–143.

93 Graham 1989, 288.

94 Graham 1989, 289.

95 See Sterckx 2011, 188–189. Roel Sterckx underscores the quasi supernatural, transcendent qualities of the ruler, which result, however, from a system of deception that relies on carefully executed ruses and techniques of surveillance. On this point, see Levi 1999, 28–29. Ivanhoe (2011, 36–37) argues plausibly that the seeming mysticism created by Han Fei’s adoption of “characteristically Daoist ideas” is in reality about “changing the *appearance* and *perception* of the ruler rather than altering his fundamental nature or character” (italics in the original) through “an extensive, subtle, and cunning policy of deception and cover-up”.

96 *Zhuangzi* 13, 475; tr. modified from Watson 1968, 144.

97 On this term, whose usefulness and appropriateness Paul R. Goldin rejects, see Goldin 2011a.

用天下，下必有為為天下用)⁹⁸ The ruler's adoption of non-action does not mean that there will be no activity whatever. Rather, the roles of the ruler and the ruled become at once sharply distinguished and mutually complementary. Hierarchies remain entrenched. The "source" (*ben* 本), which forms the "essential" (*yao* 要) of political and ritual matters, lies with the ruler, while "trivia" (*mo* 末) and "details" (*xiang* 詳) are the responsibility of the ministers below.⁹⁹

The text upholds fundamental distinctions of rank and familial status. The sage imitates the patterns of precedence, which are naturally established by "Heaven and earth" and which consequently pervade social and political life from the politico-ritual centre of the ancestral temple down to each village. Such a hierarchical order (*xu* 序) is intrinsic to the Way itself.¹⁰⁰ This is the backdrop for the following passage addressing self-cultivation:

是故古之明大道者，先明天而道德次之，道德已明而仁義次之，仁義已明而分守次之，分守已明而形名次之，形名已明而因任次之，因任已明而原省次之，原省已明而是非次之，是非已明而賞罰次之。賞罰已明而愚知處宜，貴賤履位，仁賢不肖襲情，必分其能，必由其名。以此事上，以此畜下，以此治物，以此修身，知謀不用，必歸其天，此之謂太平，治之至也。

Therefore, the men of ancient times who clearly understood the Great Way first made clear Heaven and then went on to the Way and its Virtue. Having made clear the Way and its Virtue, they went on to benevolence and righteousness. Having made clear benevolence and righteousness, they went on to the observance of duties. Having made clear the observance of duties, they went on to forms and names. Having made clear forms and names, they went on to the assignment of suitable offices. Having made clear the assignment of suitable offices, they went on to the scrutiny of performance. Having made clear the scrutiny of performance, they went on to the judgment of right and wrong. Having made clear the judgment of right and wrong, they went on to rewards and punishments. Having made clear rewards and punishments, they could be certain that stupid and wise were in their proper place, that eminent and lowly were rightly ranked, that good and worthy men as well as unworthy ones showed their true form, that all had duties suited to their abilities, that all acted in accordance with their titles.

It was in this way that one served superiors, shepherded inferiors, ordered external things and cultivated one's person. Knowledge and scheming were unused, yet all found rest in Heaven. This was called the Great Peace, the Highest Government.¹⁰¹

The text outlines a comprehensive view of political organisation, starting out from a cosmic perspective – the "great way/principle" – and moving all the way down to questions of

98 *Zhuangzi* 13, 476; tr. from Watson 1968, 144.

99 *Zhuangzi* 13, 479; tr. from Watson 1968, 145–146.

100 *Zhuangzi* 13, 479–480; tr. in Watson 1968, 146.

101 *Zhuangzi* 13, 482; tr. modified from Watson 1968, 146–147.

dividing tasks (*fen shou* 分守), performance and employment (形名已明而因任次之), imposing order and creating ranks (賞罰已明而愚知處宜), recognising talent (*fen qi neng* 分其能), setting up formal hierarchies (*gui jian li wei* 貴賤履位), and finding one's own proper place within such hierarchies (此事上, 以此畜下). In places, the terminology is close to what one would expect to find in writings commonly assigned to the "Legalist" tradition. There are terms closely associated with Shen Buhai, for instance, "title and performance" (*xing ming* 形名) and "the assignment of suitable offices" (*yin ren* 因任). But there is also "rewards and punishments" (*shang fa* 賞罰), Han Fei's "two handles" (*er bing* 二柄) of government.¹⁰² All these wide-ranging activities are subsumed under the opposed terms "governing [external] things" (*zhi wu* 治物) and "cultivating one's person" (*xiu shen* 修身), a concept of political rule akin to the "way of internally becoming a sage and externally ruling as a king" (內聖外王之道) promoted in *Zhuangzi* chapter 33, "Tian xia" 天下, and also similar to the following view propounded in the *Wenzi* 文子:

夫道, 无為无形, 內以脩身, 外以治人。

The Way is without activity and without form. Internally, one cultivates one's person with it, externally, one governs others with it.¹⁰³

It is very questionable, however, whether self-cultivation means a striving for moral excellence in either of these contexts. Instead, self-cultivation appears to be one of the means rulers utilise in order to establish Graham's "automatic social order", which involves the seamless integration of the machinery of the state with all its norms and hierarchies.

102 On *xing ming* see Creel 1970 [1959], 84. Chen and Sung (2015, 253) note that although Creel identifies Shen Buhai as the originator of *xing ming* as "a technique of bureaucratic management", no extant *Shenzi* fragment contains the term. Furthermore, they point out that the "Dao fa" 道法 section of "Jing fa" 經法 in the so-called "Four Canons" describes the "Dao as the source of authority and justification for proper definitions of job titles", which thus "cannot be issued as arbitrary, authoritative commands." For the passage in question, see Yates 1997, 50–51. See also Ivanhoe 2011, 39. Wang Shumin (1992, 197–199, 249–250) argues that *xing ming* had different meanings for Shen Buhai, Shang Yang 商鞅, and Han Fei, the latter two stressing law and punishments. On *yin* see *ibid.*, 200–202, where *wu wei* also appears as a central term. Before the discoveries in Mawangdui, Jin Dejian 金德建 attempted to prove Sima Qian's claim that Shen "had his roots in Huang-Lao", but his sole point of comparison is the *Laozi*, and while some of the correspondences he points out are revealing, others are not. See Jin Dejian 1963, especially the useful juxtaposition of passages on knowledge and perception, 242–244.

103 *Wenzi* 5, 219 ("Dao de" 道德). See Wang Shumin 1992, 124–126, on *nei sheng wai wang*. Wang assumes that the *Laozi* was more interested in external rule and the *Zhuangzi* more in the internal transformation to sagehood.

Conclusion

Our discussion has taken us a long way – from the *Zhongyong*, where self-cultivation aids in the refinement of radiant virtue to the “Tian dao” chapter, which views self-cultivation as a means to fashion the state into a mechanism that oscillates in synchrony with cosmic rhythms, all the while shoring up distinctions of rank and obligation and affording the ruler complete control of his subjects. The term *xiu shen* can have practical as well as ritual components, as the reading of *Zhongyong* 20 has demonstrated. Closely aligned with this text’s outlook, yet in some respects different, *Daxue* 1 places even greater stress on mental discipline and adopts an idealised, transcendent view of self-cultivation.

Yet, self-cultivation is by no means the sole preserve of the ruler or the sage. Mythical figures of high antiquity as well as emblematic recluses of low status supposedly engaged in self-cultivation in order to prepare themselves for the event that they would be called upon for public service. A more radical position, however, was propounded as well, according to which self-cultivation should inform a way of life devoted to utter disengagement from the world.

In a variety of contexts, *xiu shen* is advocated as a means to prepare for and cope with worldly matters in general. It is mentioned in the context of advice about moderating one’s appetites and avoiding social friction. It features in what may have been codes of conduct for members of the *shi* class and also entered the into jargon that this class (or their Han successors, who applied the same designation to themselves) used to lay claim to moral superiority and, hence, political power and social influence. In the possessive ideological embrace of *Han Fei zi*, *xiu shen* was muted into quietistic rule-following and integrated into a blueprint for an authoritarian state, whereas “cultivation” (*xiu*) remained in the *Shang jun shu* a heresy irreconcilable with the principles of a state envisioned as a mechanism to transform agricultural production into military prowess. In the rhetoric of the Mohists, *xiu shen* was wielded as a propagandistic weapon against the Confucians, whom the former accused of hypocrisy (i. e. promoting *xiu shen* whilst hypocritically failing to adhere to it). Yet, in contexts that range chronologically from the last decades of the Warring States period to the Eastern Han, *xiu shen* also assumed a non-emphatic sense of common decency, synonymous with an unwillingness to engage in unlawful activity. Lastly, advocating a conception of rulership that can be conceived of as the obverse of the *Zhongyong* and *Daxue*’s rule by moral excellence, the “Tian dao” chapter of the *Zhuangzi* merges non-action, the ideal of a carefully adjusted administrative machinery, and the notion of self-cultivation into a vision of the state which approaches that of so-called “Legalist” authors such as Shen Buhai and Han Fei.

The semantic and ideological range covered by the term *xiu shen* is thus remarkably broad. It is not exclusively applied to rulers or moral paragons. Nor is it consistently associated with metaphysical, spiritual, or educational concerns. On the contrary, it frequently

appears in mundane contexts. The pursuit of longevity and the regulation of physiological processes involving, for instance, the control of vital energy (*qi* 氣) seldom appear in close connection with *xiu shen*. And with the notable exceptions of *Daxue* and *Zhongyong*, it seem unlikely that there was a frequent emphasis on the mythical or spiritual connotations of the term. It does, however, figure into ideological debates and discourses that assert political interests.

Due to its preliminary character, the present study cannot fully capture the nuances of *xiu shen*, let alone exhaust the conceptual and philosophical dimensions of self-cultivation. The preceding discussion suggests that there is still room to further clarify the discursive strands where *xiu shen* plays a role, and to identify with greater precision the relevant issues, vocabulary and concepts that characterise these discourses. As for the larger problem of moral self-discipline and the fostering of virtue in early China, there is a significant number of lexical items waiting to be analysed in detail, just as there is a large body of writings to be combed through for their distinct concepts of self-improvement and their intrinsic concerns.

Appendix: Occurrences of *Xiu Shen* 修身 in Pre-Qin and Han Texts
(based on Donald Sturgeon's www.ctext.org)

Text	Occurrences
<i>Liji</i>	15
<i>Hanshu</i>	14
<i>Kongzi jiyu</i>	10
<i>Hou Hanshu</i>	7
<i>Lunheng</i>	6 (7)
<i>Xunzi</i>	5
<i>Zhuangzi</i>	5
<i>Shiji</i>	5
<i>Hanshi waizhuan</i>	5
<i>Shuoyuan</i>	5
<i>Huainan zi</i>	4
<i>Wenzi</i>	4
<i>Lienü zhuan</i>	4
<i>Qianfu lun</i>	4
<i>Han Fei zi</i>	3
<i>Da Dai liji</i>	3

Text	Occurrences
<i>Mengzi</i>	2
<i>Guanzi</i>	2
<i>Lüshi chunqiu</i>	2
<i>Xinshu</i>	2
<i>Yantie lun</i>	2
<i>Fayan</i>	2
<i>Fengsu tongyi</i>	2
<i>Laozi Heshang gong zhu</i>	2
<i>Mozi</i>	1
<i>Guoyu</i>	1
<i>Chunqiu fanlu</i>	1
<i>Xiaojing</i>	1
<i>Xinxu</i>	1
<i>Zhonglun</i>	1
<i>Cai Zhonglangji</i>	1
TOTAL	122 (123)

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