

A Postprint Investigation of Relationships Among Pre-Qin Philosophers Based on BLAST Textual Reuse

Authors: Niu Liang, Xiang Wei

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Delineating and analyzing the scholarly landscape of Pre-Qin masters, as well as clarifying the interrelationships among them, significantly facilitates the exploration of their intellectual inheritance and influence.

[Method/Process] Employing text reuse as the methodological approach, this study first constructs a citation network to investigate citation patterns within the masters' texts; subsequently, it examines how Mencius and Xunzi cite the Analects to analyze their absorption and transformation of ideas therefrom; finally, it evaluates whether Lüshi Chunqiu or Xunzi better qualifies as the synthesizer.

[Results/Conclusion] In the citation network, Han Feizi and Xunzi demonstrate more extensive connections with other masters, indicating a realist orientation in Pre-Qin thought. Regarding citations of the Analects, Mencius emphasizes the cultivation of virtue, while Xunzi emphasizes the reflection of realist disposition in spiritual configuration. The citation network reveals that Lüshi Chunqiu better fits the role of synthesizer than Xunzi.

Full Text

An Examination of the Relationship between Pre-Qin Thinkers Based on BLAST Text Reuse*

Niu Liang¹, Xiang Wei²

¹College of Economics & Management, China Jiliang University, Hangzhou 310018, China

²School of Art, Zhejiang International Studies University, Hangzhou 310023, China

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Outlining and analyzing the scholarly landscape of Pre-Qin thinkers and clarifying the relationships among them is instrumental in uncovering their intellectual inheritance and influence. **[Method/Process]** Using text reuse as an analytical tool, this study first constructs a citation network to examine citation patterns among the thinkers’ texts; then investigates how *Mencius* and *Xunzi* cite the *Analects* to analyze their absorption and transformation of its ideas; and finally examines whether *Lüshi Chunqiu* or *Xunzi* better qualifies as the synthesizer. **[Result/Conclusion]** In the citation network, *Hanfeizi* and *Xunzi* show more extensive connections with other thinkers, indicating the realist orientation of Pre-Qin thought. In citations of the *Analects*, *Mencius* emphasizes the cultivation of virtue, while *Xunzi* reflects a realist character in its spiritual formation. The citation network reveals that *Lüshi Chunqiu* better fits the synthesizer role than *Xunzi*.

Keywords: Pre-Qin thinkers; Text reuse; Citation networks; Synthesizer

The Pre-Qin thinkers lived in what Karl Jaspers termed the Axial Age, engaging in critical and reflective questioning of the real world while proposing new insights into realms beyond it, thereby profoundly influencing the development of Chinese culture [1]. Their doctrines contained shared knowledge as well as mutual critique, attack, and covert absorption and integration [2]. Hao Jidong et al., starting from the “Nine Schools and Ten Sects” theory in the *Book of Han · Treatise on Arts and Literature* regarding the origins of Pre-Qin thinkers, traced the formation from shamanic groups to scribe-officials and royal functionaries, and then to the emergence of the various schools, revealing the developmental process of philosophical thought through critical inheritance [3]. Collins examined the intellectual evolution of Pre-Qin thinkers through critical inheritance, noting how Mozi proposed universal love in response to Confucius, Mencius advocated innate goodness against Yang Zhu, and Xunzi countered Mencius with the theory of innate evil [4]. Li Dongjun argues that the thinkers’ citation of Confucius’ ideas in their writings opened possibilities for his later sanctification [5]. Xiao Bin contends that under the new value system of a “profit-based society,” Xunzi critically absorbed various schools, forming the

characteristic “broad knowledge, refined consideration, and comprehensive inclusion” of Xunzi’s philosophy [6]. Guo Moruo regarded Xunzi as the last great master among Pre-Qin thinkers, who not only synthesized Confucianism but also integrated the Hundred Schools [7].

Clarifying the absorption and integration among these thinkers’ doctrines greatly aids understanding their position in Chinese culture. Since such intellectual absorption can be observed through their citations of others’ statements, identifying these citation patterns reveals their scholarly contributions. As ancient writing lacked modern academic citation standards, traditional research required extensive knowledge and recall of textual content and position, along with manual cross-referencing. However, manual methods cannot exhaust all textual content; they rely on researchers’ academic training to selectively locate specific materials, speculatively describing citation relationships. While such research is illuminating, it creates selection bias, yielding conclusions that vary by researcher [8]. The ideal approach is to identify all textual citations among thinkers, for which natural language processing technology “text reuse” provides an opportunity [9]. Text reuse has been applied in various fields: in political science, it detects overlapping language in legislation to track unchanged and changed policy ideas [10]; in early Chinese text transmission, it identifies errors and modifications in ancient texts’ repeated copying and compilation to reflect complex textual histories [11]; in art history, it identifies citations in Chinese painting theory to analyze sedimented genetic concepts, thereby understanding Chinese painting’s aesthetic orientation [12].

The thinkers’ absorption and integration through citation generates several investigable issues. This paper uses text reuse to explore: What are the important texts of Pre-Qin thinkers? How do *Mencius* and *Xunzi*, as Confucian sources, creatively transform the *Analects*? Between the debated texts *Lüshi Chunqiu* and *Xunzi*, which is the synthesizer?

1. Text Reuse and the BLAST Method

Text reuse is conducted by calculating similarity between source texts and potentially reused texts. Common methods include sequence alignment and bag-of-words approaches. Sequence alignment compares texts character-by-character to find the longest continuous matching sequences, typically using local alignment algorithms [13]. However, this algorithm employs exact sequence matching. While yielding good results, local alignment has a time complexity of $O(mn)$ for sequences of length m and n , which becomes prohibitively expensive for long sequences [14]. Bag-of-words methods disregard word order in compared sentences, relying instead on word probability distributions. Thematic models are commonly used, mining relationships between hidden topics and words within texts to obtain topic distributions for similarity calculation [15]. While effective at capturing thematic domains, bag-of-words can only compare entire documents and cannot capture local overlaps. When source texts far exceed target texts in volume, thematic model comparison becomes difficult.

The BLAST (Basic Local Alignment Search Tool) method is a fundamental local alignment search technique that significantly reduces runtime while maintaining high accuracy, avoiding the requirement for large text volumes in thematic model similarity calculations. It represents an optimal solution for large-scale sequence alignment in terms of both speed and precision. Originally developed for gene sequence alignment in bioinformatics, BLAST was designed to compare nucleotide sequences and identify highly homologous regions in DNA [16]. BLAST represents the four-character set of Gs, Ts, Cs, and As in DNA as text for high-homology comparison. Extending this four-character set to a dynamically generated character set based on corpus content allows generalization to languages with arbitrarily large vocabularies, enabling character-level processing of multilingual similarity problems [17].

When applied to language, BLAST works as follows: First, it breaks input sequences into fragments using n-gram to construct k possible seed words; then compares these seeds against sequences in a pre-indexed database (where the index database comprises sequence fragments from all texts according to n-gram, including fragment ID, position in text, and text ID); selects positions with high continuous scores among seed words for extension using dynamic programming algorithms, employing Levenshtein distance for scoring, with extension terminating when scores fall below threshold; finally outputs high-scoring sequences. To improve computational speed, concurrent processing can be employed during sequence extension and comparison. The specific BLAST process is shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

The thinkers' absorption and integration of ideas through citation raises several research questions. This paper uses text reuse to investigate: What are the important texts of Pre-Qin thinkers? How do *Mencius* and *Xunzi*, as Confucian sources, creatively transform the *Analects*? Between the debated texts *Lüshi Chunqiu* and *Xunzi*, which is the synthesizer?

Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper] shows the citation patterns of the *Analects*. As seen in the figure, *Kongzi Jiayu* contains the most similar statements to the *Analects*, followed by *Mencius* and *Xunzi*. Since *Kongzi Jiayu* is a record of Confucius' words and deeds compiled by his disciples in the late Warring States period, its thought is similar to the *Analects* and can be considered supplementary material. It categorizes and summarizes the "scholar," "gentleman," "worthy person," and "sage" discussed in the *Analects*, expounding Confucius' self-cultivation path without offering unique scholarly contributions [21].

Mencius and Xunzi are recognized members of the Confucian school, yet their different theories of human nature led them to make different selections from Confucius' teachings, determining their intellectual trajectories. Representative overlapping statements between *Mencius* and *Xunzi* with the *Analects* have been selected and contextualized to understand the intellectual resources they absorbed from the *Analects*, as shown in Table 2 and Table 3 .

From the overlapping statements between *Mencius* and the *Analects*, it is evident that Mencius' selection of the *Analects*' sayings is guided by his prioritization of virtue. Mencius sometimes extends Confucius' positions further, as seen in his treatment of “detesting Zheng music for fear it would corrupt proper music.” Beyond accepting Confucius' emphasis on the Mean and virtue prioritization with benevolence as foundation [22], Mencius expands this to righteousness, trustworthiness, music, and virtue, issuing warnings about virtue's corruption: “I detest what appears right but is not; I detest weeds for fear they will confuse the seedlings; I detest flattery for fear it will confuse righteousness; I detest glibness for fear it will confuse trustworthiness; I detest Zheng music for fear it will confuse proper music; I detest purple for fear it will confuse vermillion; I detest village worthies for fear they will confuse virtue.” This highlights his innate goodness stance. In Confucius' original context, the statement “detest purple usurping vermillion, detest Zheng music corrupting proper music, detest glibness overturning states” emphasizes institutional issues of ritual and music. Mencius' virtue ethics thus penetrates deeper and broader than Confucius', relating to his philosophical premise of innate human goodness.

Xunzi's citations and elaborations of the *Analects* focus on practical dimensions, creatively transforming borrowed concepts. Regarding the attitude toward “reflection” (思), Confucius' “the gentleman has nine considerations” takes a prescriptive stance—what a gentleman should possess. *Xunzi*'s “the gentleman has three considerations” redirects “reflection” toward causal inference, arguing that moral cultivation can be achieved through learning. This “reflection” extends beyond prescriptions for gentlemanly behavior to encompass human nature (birth and aging) and sociality (poverty and wealth), offering a different realist stance on “reflection” from Confucius. If Confucius' “reflection” leads to self-cultivation, *Xunzi*'s leads to statecraft. In treating the *Book of Songs* verse “as if cut, as if carved, as if polished, as if ground,” the *Analects* discusses self-cultivation through Zigong's discourse: “The poem says: ‘As if cut, as if carved, as if polished, as if ground.’ Does this not apply?” Confucius replies: “Ci, now I can discuss poetry with you! You infer the future from the past.” *Xunzi* discusses scholarly progress: “Human engagement with literature is like jade's engagement with polishing. The *Poetry* says: ‘As if cut, as if carved, as if polished, as if ground.’ This describes learning.” *Xunzi* asks “Does the gentleman also have worries?” while the *Analects* has a similar “Does the gentleman also have detestations?” This difference reveals distinct positions: *Xunzi* examines the gentleman's “gain and loss,” while Confucius examines “morality.” Regarding “What qualifies one as a scholar?” *Xunzi* focuses on the “knowledge-action” level, while Confucius remains at the “moral” level, emphasizing the moral issue of “shame.” These differences show that despite *Xunzi* responding to Confucius' questions, his discourse has shifted to a realist stance. Scholars argue that *Xunzi*'s views on Heaven and humanity, human nature, and ritual represent the spiritual manifestation of his realist character, possessing greater practical rationality than Mencius' introspection [23].

4. Who is the Synthesizer of the Thinkers?

Guo Moruo highly praised Xunzi, stating: “Xunzi is the last great master among Pre-Qin thinkers. He not only synthesized Confucianism but can be said to have synthesized the Hundred Schools. Almost no Pre-Qin school escaped his critique” [7]. Sun Yikai et al. disagree, identifying *Lüshi Chunqiu* as the synthesizer. Their reasoning is that Xunzi did not consciously or publicly absorb and integrate various schools, whereas *Lüshi Chunqiu* did so consciously, intentionally, and openly [24]. To clarify this, citations from *Xunzi* and *Lüshi Chunqiu* were extracted for analysis. Red lines indicate citation relationships, as shown in Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper].

The results in Figure 4 clearly show that *Lüshi Chunqiu* better fits the synthesizer description, as it cites a broader range of texts and more content. *Lüshi Chunqiu* also demonstrates its extensive citations through its evaluations: “Laozi values softness, Confucius values benevolence, Mozi values frugality, Guan Yin values purity, Liezi values emptiness, Chen Pian values equality, Yang Zhu values self, Sun Bin values strategic advantage, Wang Liao values initiative, Ni Liang values response.”

4.1 *Lüshi Chunqiu* and the Thinkers

Lüshi Chunqiu cites all other texts, most extensively *Zhuangzi*, *Liezi*, *Mozi*, and *Hanfeizi*, touching upon various schools. As an eclectic text, many of its ideas reference Daoist positions. However, its absorption of Daoism aims to constrain monarchical power and achieve governance through non-action and comprehensive action. As Lü Buwei’s work on statecraft, it cannot be purely Daoist “non-action” and “small states with few people,” but rather contains pragmatic and statecraft elements. This can be analyzed through its most frequently cited *Zhuangzi* passages, as shown in Table 4 .

Table 4 shows that *Lüshi Chunqiu* modifies *Zhuangzi*’s text to address practical issues. While *Zhuangzi*’s discourse tends toward universal philosophical propositions, *Lüshi Chunqiu* responds to real-world problems. The “Way” (道) in *Lüshi Chunqiu* differs from *Zhuangzi*’s—it is a pattern and momentum realized in concrete operations. *Lüshi Chunqiu* states “the reason sages govern the world,” modifying *Zhuangzi*’s “the sage’s mind nourishes the world,” replacing “nourish” (蓄) with “govern” (治). Because it is “governance,” sages require various functions. *Lüshi Chunqiu* summarizes twenty offices: “Shi Huang created diagrams, Wu Peng created medicine, Wu Xian created divination—these twenty offices are how sages govern the world.” In *Zhuangzi*, “nourish” leads to metaphysical “emptiness and tranquility”: “Using emptiness and tranquility to extend to heaven and earth, to connect with all things—this is called heavenly music. Heavenly music is the sage’s mind nourishing the world.”

Regarding “no one knows its beginning, no one knows its end,” *Lüshi Chunqiu* discusses the “supremely noble,” pointing to “scholars of the Way” who “though nobly honored as Son of Heaven are not arrogant, though wealthy as possess-

ing the world are not boastful, though lowly as commoners are not distressed, though poor without clothing are not fearful, firm in their sincerity, confident in their certainty, unwavering in their resolve, transforming with yin and yang, steadfast in mind, free from cunning, far-reaching in aspiration, unfathomable in depth, unyielding in integrity, unwilling to self-assert, ashamed to use cunning, indifferent to vulgar praise or blame.” *Zhuangzi*’s “no one knows its beginning, no one knows its end” points to the metaphysical “Way”: “The Way has reality and trustworthiness, without action or form; can be transmitted but not received, can be obtained but not seen; rooted in itself, existing before heaven and earth, anciently thus preserved.”

The attitudes toward “being born without knowing why one is born” also differ. *Lüshi Chunqiu* takes a cognitive approach, pursuing the “why,” rejecting mere “knowing that.” It states “knowing the why of knowing is called knowing the Way,” representing reflective thinking. *Zhuangzi* takes a naturalistic perspective: “not knowing why one is born” is life, “not knowing why one obtains” is obtaining—returning to the natural state is best, what he calls “naturally thus born.” *Zhuangzi* does not 执着于 reflective “knowing,” differing from *Lüshi Chunqiu*. The analysis shows *Lüshi Chunqiu* cites and transforms *Zhuangzi*’s text in multiple places, inheriting, developing, and modifying his fables’ original meanings. Scholars argue that after *Lüshi Chunqiu*’s transformation of *Zhuangzi*’s thought, it bridges the gap between *Zhuangzi*’s philosophy and reality, better fitting the political pursuit of governing the people through tranquility [25].

Daoist philosophy emphasizes “emptiness and tranquility,” but *Lüshi Chunqiu* weakens this aspect, adopting the pragmatic orientation of Legalism and Mohism. This explains why *Hanfeizi* ranks second in its citations. *Hanfeizi*’s core doctrine combines law, technique, and momentum based on monarchical absolutism, advocating extreme utilitarianism, viewing human relationships as primarily profit-driven, with benevolent education as supplementary, emphasizing rule by law and utilization of people—a clear pragmatic stance.

Lüshi Chunqiu selectively absorbs various schools: accepting Confucian monarchical thought while developing authoritarian ideas, yet as Lü Buwei held prime ministerial power, he expected and required the monarch to practice “non-action and comprehensive action,” thus possessing a Daoist orientation. It accepts Mohist frugality but rejects “anti-aggression” and “righteous warfare” doctrines. All these express a pragmatic stance.

4.2 *Xunzi* and the Thinkers

Xunzi’s creative transformation of the *Analects* expresses a realist orientation, as previously described. Among cited thinkers, *Mozi* shows the most prominent citation relationship, indicating *Xunzi*’s emphasis on *Mozi*. Comparing contextual usage of overlapping statements between *Xunzi* and *Mozi* reveals *Xunzi*’s realist stance, as shown in Table 5 .

Comparing the textual contexts of *Xunzi* and *Mozi* reveals that *Xunzi*’s rectifica-

tion of names (正名) stems from human desires, while *Mozi*'s comes from ghostly spirits' adjudication. *Xunzi* discusses humans from start to finish, whereas *Mozi* involves humans at the beginning but ends with ghosts and spirits. For example, the highly similar statements "promote shared benefits for the world, eliminate shared harms for the world" appear in different contexts. *Xunzi*'s complete context is: "Tang and Wu cultivated their way, practiced their righteousness, promoted shared benefits for the world, eliminated shared harms for the world, and the world submitted to them." *Mozi*'s complete context is: "Now the world's kings, dukes, great men, and gentlemen sincerely desire to promote benefits for the world and eliminate harms for the world. Regarding the existence of ghosts and spirits, they must be respected and clarified—this is the way of sage kings." Thus *Xunzi* refers to human agency, while *Mozi* attributes to ghosts and spirits. *Mozi*'s failure to consider humans from a human perspective, unable to transcend limitations, is one reason his school declined after the Warring States period. *Xunzi*'s philosophy, based on human nature's desires, possesses realist character and further elevates this realism with moral education and practice as theoretical aims. Through his "Contra Twelve Philosophers" chapter, *Xunzi* provided critical commentary on contemporary intellectual schools, revealing both blind spots and insights from his academic position, theoretical system, and practical political concerns [26].

The citation networks of *Lüshi Chunqiu* and *Xunzi* show that *Xunzi*, as an independent philosopher, did not consciously or publicly absorb and integrate various schools, whereas *Lüshi Chunqiu* did so consciously, intentionally, and openly, with the most extensive citations. Therefore, *Lüshi Chunqiu* better fits the "synthesizer" characterization, consistent with Sun Yikai et al.'s argument [24].

This study employs the BLAST text reuse method to explore relationships among Pre-Qin thinkers. By applying dynamic programming algorithms in limited regions, computational load is reduced and speed increased. The relationship construction is based on inter-textual citations, which reflect intellectual inheritance and transformation. The results show that *Lüshi Chunqiu* receives the highest attention in the citation network, reflecting the realist orientation of Pre-Qin thought. *Mencius*'s citations of the *Analects* emphasize virtue cultivation, while *Xunzi*'s reflect realist concerns. In examining which text qualifies as the "synthesizer," the citation network reveals that *Lüshi Chunqiu* cites more thinkers, consciously, intentionally, and openly absorbing and integrating various schools, better fitting the synthesizer role than *Xunzi*.

The study's limitations include the limited number of Pre-Qin texts analyzed, restricting conclusions to these thinkers. Chinese culture has a long history, and how Pre-Qin thought was cited, elaborated, and transformed by later thinkers to form Chinese culture's spiritual lineage requires more extensive corpus analysis—work left for future research.

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