

# Introduction

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Some explanation ought to be offered for an entire book dedicated to Xu Fuguan's thought, who is not the most prominent New Ruist thinker. He is by no means a household name in Chinese communities, and I would speculate that his writings are not frequently read in philosophy classes. He never had the ambition to develop the kind of philosophical system that his contemporaries Tang Junyi and Mou Zongsan did. While like other scholars of the period (including the two just mentioned), he wrote voluminously, he never published anything in English, other than the jointly authored "Declaration on Behalf of Chinese Culture Respectfully Announced to the People of the World," and how much of this document his contributions represent is not clear. The present volume represents the first appearance of any of his individually authored works in English.

The question, then, is why we should be interested in the thought of this particular twentieth-century Chinese scholar. I will answer that in several ways. First, due to his background he had greater connections with the significant historical and political figures of the time than most scholars. I would surmise not many had personal relationships with both Mao Zedong and Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek). As a general in the Nationalist (GMD) army, he had a closer look at the military and political situation than most. Xu's writings thus provide an intriguing perspective on the fall of mainland China and the early years of GMD rule of Taiwan.

Second, Xu is both more accessible and more congenial philosophically for most modern English speakers than Mou or Tang, his contem-

poraries who are more widely studied in the Sinophone academic world. Both were fond of neologisms based on classical Chinese works, frequently reference nearly the entire history of Chinese thought, and constructed their philosophical systems in response to dense German philosophers (Kant in Mou's case, Hegel in Tang's). Without significant acquaintance with these philosophers, as well most of the history of Chinese philosophy, it is very difficult to understand their systems, which tend toward elaborate metaphysics. Xu was very critical of this metaphysical turn, arguing that it misconstrues Chinese thought. While his works are not always easy—the frequency of classical Chinese quotations from a wide variety of sources being the most troublesome for the translator—he generally is more approachable for the reader. This is surely in part because most of what is translated here was published in semipopular journals that aimed to reach an audience outside of academia.

Philosophically, his rejection of metaphysics means he turns out to have more in common with the more ontologically reserved positions common in Anglo-American philosophy. Xu is not committed to naturalism at all; it is difficult to pin down his position precisely, but certainly he believes that there are truths that are neither logical nor scientific. Yet he is closer to that than many other representatives of New Ruism, and it is not hard to see how his thought could be modified to fit within a naturalistic worldview. In his rejection of anything like divine revelation as a source for morality, he shares a great deal with many modern Western ethical philosophers.

Finally, Xu is an excellent representative of the dominant New Ruist view of democracy, a view which only recently has found any representation in Anglophone works on Ruist political thought. The interpretations of Ruist political thought that get the most attention are mainly antidemocratic to some degree, strongly critical of a focus on individual freedom, and favor a significant meritocratic component to government to avoid the problems of voter ignorance and bias. Xu rejects all of these positions. He was an unfailing supporter of *more* democracy in Taiwan (and China, eventually), he strongly believed in the importance of individual freedom (while having grave reservations about liberalism in the British tradition in particular), and having lived in such an environment, he was highly suspicious of any claims to meritocratic rule. Instead, his interpretation of Ruism is that it *requires* democracy. It would not be too strong to say modern liberal democratic institutions at

long last provide the environment where it would be *possible* to realize Ruist political goals.

I have found his arguments here fascinating and incisive, and while he may be overly optimistic about the reality of democracy, his claims are worth serious consideration. At the very least, as someone well acquainted with life in a dictatorship that claimed to be governing in the people's best interests, his criticisms of it deserve attention by anyone who thinks meritocratic government is a realistic possibility. Scholars who hope for that should perhaps be careful what they wish for: Xu's own life illustrates that those in power often don't look kindly on criticism from intellectuals.

### Xu Fuguan's Life

Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 was originally named Bingchang 秉常 and born to a peasant family in Xishui county, Hubei province, on January 31, 1903.<sup>1</sup> His early education was at home under the tutelage of his father. When he was fifteen he began to attend Wuchang First Normal School. During this period of schooling, he chose the style name Foguan 佛觀 for himself. Showing a talent for scholarship, he was admitted to Wuchang Academy of Chinese Studies at twenty-one. After graduating he had difficulty making a living and so in 1926 he joined the Nationalist (GMD) Army. Around this time, Xu had his first contact with modern political work: first the writings of Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen), then Marxism and other economics and philosophy. By the time he went to Japan to study in 1928, he had lost interest in reading anything else, particularly the Chinese literature he had grown up with. After studying economics for a year at Meiji University, he was unable to continue paying tuition and left. In 1930 he returned to Japan, this time attending army officers' school.

After the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in September 1931, Xu returned to China and continued advancing through the ranks during the War of Resistance against Japan, working his way up to the rank of general while seeing combat action. He married Wang Shigao in 1935, and they remained together for forty-seven years. In 1942 the Nationalist command sent Xu to Yan'an as GMD liaison with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) army there as part of the United Front to resist Japan and

he stayed there for several months. During this period he had several personal meetings with Mao Zedong, forming a favorable impression of him and Zhou Enlai. Xu thereafter became something of the GMD expert on the CCP. After leaving Yan'an, Xu went to Chongqing, the temporary capital during the war, in late 1942.

There he had two meetings that impacted the rest of his life. He met Xiong Shili in person for the first time, and reported that Xiong's severe scolding of his shallow method of reading completely changed his attitude toward scholarly pursuits and reversed more than fifteen years of disdain for "thread-bound [i.e., traditional] books."<sup>2</sup> He had already expressed a wish to retire from the military, and his meetings with Xiong strengthened his desire to leave the army and return to serious scholarship. It was Xiong who suggested changing his name from Foguan 佛觀 to Fuguan 復觀. Xu was also invited to meet with Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) to give his opinions on the CCP, beginning a significant personal acquaintanceship with Jiang. Xu did retire from the army in 1946, shortly after the conclusion of World War II, but remained a member of the GMD and was a personal secretary to Jiang Jieshi for a period.

Jiang was impressed with Xu and when the Chinese government moved back to Nanjing, Xu accompanied Jiang and advised him on how to rebuild the country and win more popular support. One of Xu's recommendations to restore land to the farmers became the basis for the later GMD land reform plan in Taiwan. When Jiang resigned from the presidency for a time and retired to his hometown of Xikou, Xu stayed with him for forty days in early 1949. However, it was becoming clear to Xu that the GMD situation was hopeless and the Communists would win the civil war. He left China with his family for good in May 1949. Later that year he started the journal *Democratic Review* in Hong Kong, which became one of the main New Ruist journals and the source of many of the articles translated here. Though Xu was very critical of the GMD government, *Democratic Review* was initially funded by members of the party, with Jiang himself providing some of the early funds.<sup>3</sup>

After moving back and forth between Hong Kong and Taiwan, Xu settled in Taizhong, Taiwan, in 1952 and began to make good on his ambition to become a scholar. That year he took his first teaching position, teaching a course on international organizations and the international situation at Taizhong Agricultural School. The following year he became a full-time instructor, teaching first-year Chinese. In 1955 Donghai (Tunghai) University was founded as a private Christian

university in Taizhong. Xu was invited to teach in the newly established Chinese department. He would remain there for the next fourteen years. Even while teaching, Xu was an outspoken critic of many policies of the government and strongly favored more democracy in print, though this resulted in his expulsion from the GMD in March 1957. Then he had to cease publication of *Democratic Review* in 1966 due to lack of funds. As a result of his criticisms, he was eventually forced to retire from Donghai University in 1969. Unable to get another job in Taiwan, he spent most of his remaining years in Hong Kong. During a visit to Taiwan in 1980, he was diagnosed with cancer. Xu passed away in 1982 in Taiwan.

### Xu's Scholarship

Xu's research always had a particular ambition: defending and promoting Chinese tradition as he saw it. His writings show great preoccupation with "the question of Chinese culture." While never defined precisely, his concern was to articulate the value of Chinese tradition in the face of three threats. The first two were overt attacks on Chinese tradition, going back to the May Fourth era. One of these threats was the Communist government on mainland China. Although Xu had some early interest in Marxism, he could not tolerate the antitraditional aspect of Chinese Communism, which became even more severe during the Cultural Revolution. His strong views against Communism were based on the materialist view of human nature (which he felt denied morality by reducing it to class interest) and the revolutionary aspect, which wanted to discard tradition.

His split with the liberal camp in Taiwan was due to the same rejection of tradition and their overly narrow view of knowledge. The liberal camp in Taiwan, including Hu Shi 胡適, Zhang Foquan 張佛泉, and Yin Haiguang 殷海光, also advocated discarding the outdated culture (which they usually identified as Ruist) in favor of complete Westernization. Much like the Communists, they held Ruism responsible for China's lack of modernization which made it vulnerable to imperialism. Xu shared the concern with modernization, but felt that China had to modernize within its tradition rather than by trying to discard it.

The third threat was from an incorrect interpretation of Chinese culture, Ruism in particular. This came from the GMD. Perhaps as a response to the explicit antitraditionalism of the CCP, perhaps because

they felt that it would be politically useful, the GMD government promoted their interpretation of Ruism in Taiwan,<sup>4</sup> which focused on elitism, deference to political authority, and maintenance of hierarchy. While claiming to preserve Chinese tradition, in Xu's view they had no understanding of it, and he dedicated much of his work to arguing that Ruism was in fact politically liberal and democratic, with space for individual freedom. Yet unlike the liberals, he upheld universal morality based on the Mengzian conception of human nature, which he felt was the correct characterization of what being human is. His scholarship is thus fundamentally directed toward supporting his understanding of Chinese tradition.

A central element of this is "concern consciousness" (*youhuan yishi* 憂患意識), which is the term he developed to describe the central focus of the Chinese intellectual tradition. Rather than disinterested search for knowledge of the world, which he identifies as the goal of Western intellectual traditions, Chinese intellectuals were concerned about fixing social and political problems. Concern consciousness is an awareness of the possible consequences of one's actions and sense of responsibility to have a positive impact on the world, understanding that one's choices have significant effects. For intellectuals in particular, it meant a duty to work to improve society, even at the expense of one's own interests. Xu is frequently critical of the intellectuals of his time for looking out for themselves, rather than standing up to speak truth to power. The value of an intellectual is about much more than only scholarly accomplishment.

The true measure of scholarship is, in fact, how it develops a person's character, not their contribution to knowledge. He had no objection to scientific investigation, indeed considering it important and necessary. It could be another way of making a contribution to morality. What he was concerned about was a kind of scholarship that denied morality entirely in favor of mere pursuit of knowledge. "A person's value as a scholar should not merely be determined by his research achievements. It should also be determined by his sincerity in learning and by his character."<sup>5</sup> As the essays in this book make clear, Xu had no respect for the philological and historical approach to humanistic study. He believed Chinese scholarship went on the wrong track with Qing dynasty evidential research, and the introduction of Western methods of scholarship only exacerbated this trend. By focusing only on the meanings of terms, scholars of this type miss the spirit and true meaning of classical texts. Speaking of Qing dynasty scholars, he said, "In reality, while they

read a lot of books, they didn't understand a single sentence of what the ancients said that was important."<sup>6</sup> He would probably say the same about Hu Shi and scholars like him.

### Xu's Thought: Human Nature and Ethics

As previously stated, Xu rarely presented his thought systematically, instead writing articles of various lengths in response to other articles or political events going on at the time. Therefore, in order to provide a guide to the reader for the following translations, I outline some of his major themes here.

#### HUMANISM

A central theme running through one of his best-known monographs, *A History of Chinese Theories of Human Nature: The Pre-Qin Period*, is the development of Chinese thought from religion to a humanistic mindset. While not denying the importance of religious practice in Chinese society, the mainstream of Chinese thought was not religious from a very early period, in contrast to premodern European thought. This is one of Kongzi's major advances, in Xu's mind. The story he tells of the early development of Chinese thought (in the Zhou dynasty) is a story of progression from reliance on external, supernatural forces to recognition of the locus of control within human beings.

The early mindset that Xu identifies, typified in Shang dynasty oracle bone divination and hints in early texts about propitiating spirits, involves seeking approval from supernatural forces. It transfers responsibility from human beings to spirits, making their approval and disapproval the standard for human action. In essence, Xu thinks of the category of "religion" as akin to divine command theories of morality. While Kongzi, for example, never denies the existence of spirits, their will does not define good or bad action. Xu observes how Kongzi consistently refused to say much about spirits, instead always drawing attention back to human beings and individual choice and action. For example, when Ji Lu asked about serving the spirits, Kongzi responded, "When you are not able to serve people, how can you serve spirits?"<sup>7</sup> This is in stark contrast to the Mohists, who argued strongly for the importance of conforming to heaven's will and treating ghosts with care.

Ruism is foremost a kind of humanism for Xu, meaning it locates value within the human and is fundamentally concerned with improving the life of human beings, not pleasing supernatural beings. This gives Ruism its characteristic focus on “life,” which is the highest value. This means first of all caring for people as biological beings, thus not doing them harm and providing what they need to survive. It also means respecting people as moral agents and helping them to realize the moral side of their nature as well. And this is all justified without reference to supernatural agents. Ruism recognizes the reality of choice in people, rather than displacing it to a supernatural being. This is another aspect of concern consciousness: awareness that one is ultimately responsible for one’s own choices and actions.

Since the will of heaven or spirits does not provide the warrant for ethics, Xu believes Ruists had to look elsewhere, and they found it in internal experience. He therefore gives less attention to Xunzi, since Xunzi thought that, at least initially, people have no internal inclination to morality and have to learn it from an external source. This conflicts with Xu’s idea of humanism, and so he focuses much more on Kongzi and Mengzi and later Ruists who also emphasize a kind of internal experience, such as Wang Yangming. In fact, internal experience (*neizai jingyan* 內在經驗) could be called a technical term for him. It refers to introspective sorts of experiences that may be elicited by contact with some object or situation in the world, but are ultimately located within the person. Ethical value is not objective in the sense of existing outside the human heart-mind, though it is still universal, because people’s heart-minds are identical in the relevant capacities. This is why scientific confirmation of morality will always be impossible: morality cannot be proved by any sort of knowledge of the external world. Only internal experience can confirm it. That possibility of internal experience and moral response is what makes human beings human and worthy of respect.

#### HUMAN NATURE

Like the other twentieth-century New Ruists,<sup>8</sup> Xu is committed to Mengzi’s doctrine that human nature is good. For him, that means human beings have the capacity to go beyond self-interest and, at the highest level, to eradicate the distinction between self and other. Even for those who do not reach that point, there is a capacity for moral responsiveness that is sincerely motivated by care for others. Xu frequently talks about



benevolence (*ren* 仁), which he sees as the fundamental moral quality. It can be understood as sincere concern for another's well-being.

Defining human nature as including this potential to extend beyond self-interest is a way of expressing the universality of moral agency and is a crucial underpinning of democracy for Xu. As discussed above, Xu's disagreement with liberals such as Yin Haiguang were not over the goal: there wasn't much disagreement about the form of democratic government. Differences over the importance of tradition were one factor, but there was an additional philosophical point. Xu believed that the liberal belief that democracy could be established on a view of human beings as motivated fundamentally by self-interest was fatally flawed. He was critical of the excessive individualism he found in Anglo-American liberalism in particular, and thought this could not be the basis of a stable democratic society. His understanding of human nature in no way denies that people have their own interests that they will and should pursue, but it allows for other-regarding motivations as well. It is necessary to develop this aspect of human nature if democratic practice is going to work. Hence, he argues that democracy needs something like the Ruist conception of human nature to last.

We need to look at his approach to knowing human nature to appreciate Xu's distinctive contribution to New Ruist thought. The belief that human nature is good and that democracy needs Ruism is common to other New Ruists of the period, not unique to Xu. About the same time as Xu was writing his essays on democracy, Mou Zongsan was putting together the ideas that he would publish as *The Way of Authority and Governance* in 1959. What is particular to Xu is his rejection of metaphysical understandings of Ruist thought. Unlike Mou and Tang Junyi, he believed Chinese thought could not be profitably understood as a kind of metaphysics or idealism. He was certainly not a materialist, but he never put human nature on a higher ontological level outside the ordinary material world. There is a certain similarity between Xu and Jean-Paul Sartre, though as far as I can tell he did not know of Sartre's work. That is, Xu's claim that Ruism is not religious can be extended to attempts to elevate something other than God to a transcendent place and source of ultimate value, whether Hegel's spirit or Kant's noumenal self. There is one world, the one in which physical phenomena are described by science.

Xu frequently cautions against using Western philosophical models to understand Ruist thought. Chinese thought's starting point was

fundamentally different than Greek philosophy, which began with trying to understand the natural world. Chinese thought began with moral practice, and always had a more practical concern to realize moral action. Chinese and Western thought have fundamentally different characters for him. As a consequence, Chinese philosophy did not excel in understanding the physical world, and this should be left to science.<sup>9</sup> Rather than metaphysics (*xing er shang xue* 形而上學), Chinese philosophy is properly understood as embodied learning (*xing er zhong xue* 形而中學). While there are questions about exactly what this means, at minimum it has two implications for Xu: following the Chinese philosophical tradition means not erecting metaphysical systems, and the source of morality has to be found within human nature.

## KNOWLEDGE

In much of his work, Xu says there are two knowing faculties in the heart-mind, which grasp different sorts of content. “Heart-mind” is the way I have most often translated *xin* 心, because the word does also refer to the physical organ in the chest and because Chinese thought traditionally did not strictly separate affective and cognitive mental states. The heart-mind has a cognitive nature (*zhixing* 知性) and a moral nature (*dexing* 德性). The former is the source of knowledge of objects, external phenomena. The latter is the source of self-knowledge and values, which are rooted in human nature.

Western culture excelled in developing the cognitive nature, which led to natural science and the great technological advances of the industrial period. Xu believes these discoveries have had great value, and it is very important to have the better understanding of the natural world that science provides. This is something that was not developed sufficiently in Chinese culture, and Xu believes it is critical to remedy this.

However, as human nature is not a part of the external world, it is not something that can be discovered scientifically. Scientific knowledge is very important, but not all knowledge is scientific. The way to understand human nature is through the moral nature, not the cognitive nature. This means that research in psychology, for example, cannot demonstrate the truth of moral values. Rather than concluding that moral values are not real, Xu regards this as a flaw in psychology, and by extension a limit to the scientific approach generally. Moral values have to be discovered by internal experience, not investigation of phenomena.

## EMBODIED RECOGNITION

One key form of internal experience that Xu discusses extensively is what he calls “embodied recognition” (*tiren* 體認), a major epistemological concept for him. He adopted this term from Xiong Shili, who in turn drew it from the work of the Ming Ruist Wang Yangming. Characteristic of Xu, he does not provide a clear definition of the term. In “The Culture of the Heart-Mind,” chapter 9 here, he identifies it as awareness of the four moral feelings Mengzi presented. He also calls it an inward cognition of oneself. It therefore appears to be a direct, immediate awareness of the moral feelings that he identifies as human nature, a sort of self-verifying experience that cannot be denied, psychologically if not logically.

An example, perhaps, is Mengzi’s description of a person seeing a child about to fall into a well. In such a situation, anyone, according to Mengzi, would have a feeling of alarm and compassion, not based on any self-interest (which Mengzi is careful to exclude), but simply concern for the innocent child about to suffer great harm.<sup>10</sup> Liu Honghe described it as a spontaneous, prereflective response to the suffering of an innocent.<sup>11</sup> Xu says that we do not necessarily understand why we have this reaction, but we don’t need to: the feeling cannot be denied.<sup>12</sup> The phenomenological reality of the moral response is itself sufficient justification.

Analyzing this sort of example further, it is clear that there are two dimensions. There is obviously an empirical dimension: the subject in this instance has to see the child in danger in order to have the moral reaction. While Xu does not make this point, we may further add that as a matter of human psychology, people tend to respond much more strongly to that kind of direct, immediate perception of possible suffering than to more distant, secondhand information (such as testimony about children in danger in another country). And so the moral reaction is causally dependent on some empirical knowledge, which belongs to the cognitive nature. Yet this information alone is not sufficient. In a manner analogous to Hume, Xu argues that mere facts do not generate a moral response or motivate any kind of action. Even if one is taught what is good, without caring about the good it will not lead to action. For action to be possible at all, there have to be some inherently existing motives.<sup>13</sup> Embodied recognition is awareness of those motives, the moral responses that belong to human nature. Without awareness of those, the witness might indifferently observe the child fall to her death, a reaction Xu thinks is psychologically impossible for most people.

So this is a kind of experience, in that it is awareness with particular content that happens at a particular time. But though it is causally dependent on some information about the world (such as seeing the child in this example), what the agent then becomes aware of is something in herself, not the world. This is why Xu tends not to call it empirical knowledge exactly, which for him means knowledge of something separate from the agent, but internal experience. Yet as he also makes clear, it is not knowledge of some higher reality: the heart-mind known through embodied recognition is not separate from the physiological body. The “embodied” part of embodied recognition is crucial.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICE—*GONGFU*

Related to Xu’s emphasis on embodied recognition is his focus on practice, specifically practice in the real world (*xianshi shijie* 現實世界). Instead of elaborating metaphysical theories, what Ruist philosophers focused on was moral practice in the real world and how to improve it. The method for this is *gongfu* 工夫—mostly familiar from martial arts contexts but meaning any focused effort generally. In Xu’s case, *gongfu* usually means the process of moral cultivation. He says of *gongfu* that it “takes the self, especially the inner spirit, as its object for achieving a particular kind of goal. In the theory of human nature, the work of the inner spirit to realize the hidden potential of the origin of life and make manifest the source of morality—only that can be called *gongfu*.”<sup>14</sup> This is an endless process in the pursuit of moral perfection that can never be fully or permanently achieved.

Ruism to him is not about constructing moral theory but improving moral practice. Xu’s concern with practice is also visible in the earlier Ruist scholars that he chooses as exemplars. Although he is critical of Wang Yangming for neglecting the significance of greater knowledge of the world, his frequent commendation of Wang’s attitude toward *doing* in the real world comes across in these essays. Embodied recognition is not an intellectual sort of knowing, and that critical internal experience suggests that conventional philosophical study is not very helpful. Studying moral theories alone won’t produce embodied recognition: that has to be realized through action in life.<sup>15</sup>

This is again where Chinese and Western cultures diverged. Western culture, Xu was quick to admit, was superior in its realization of the cognitive nature and knowledge of the external world. However, it was not as advanced as China in development of the moral nature. This was

where Chinese thought excelled, and where it can make a contribution to world culture. One manifestation of this is the early appearance of a free society in China, by which he means a society where advancement depends on individual effort and not status determined at birth. Xu credits Kongzi with realizing this in China, centuries before the Enlightenment ushered such freedom into Europe. The goal of modernization should be to remedy the deficiency in the cognitive side while retaining the advances of the moral side.

### Xu's Thought: Politics

The most obvious point in Xu's political thought is his unwavering commitment to democracy. In a world where the value of democracy is under serious question, and where many people in East Asia in particular doubt whether democracy is suitable for their societies, this is itself noteworthy. Xu gives few details about what he means by democracy, but from what he does say it includes many typical features of liberal electoral democracy: multiple political parties, near-universal voting rights, rule of law and mechanisms for orderly transfer of power, a constitution, and protections for freedom of speech, publication, and assembly. He was no revolutionary when it came to political institutions. Most of these were already found in the Republic of China constitution at the time; he simply wanted the government to live up to them.

As already stated, Xu's primary concern, outside of advocating for democracy, is showing that there is no conflict between democratic government and Ruist political ideals. Far from a conflict, democracy will actually make possible the realization of these ideals. For Xu, democracy is what Ruists *should* have been advocating all along, but the historical realities in which they lived made that impossible and all they could do was try to mitigate the excesses of autocratic and hereditary rule. Thus, pursuing democracy does not require giving up Chinese culture, as both liberals and conservative elements of the GMD argued. There is no contradiction in having a democratic Ruist society.

#### RUIST POLITICAL IDEALS

Xu's approach to justifying democracy is to examine Ruist political ideals, describe how they could not be realized in the historical political conditions, and argue that democracy will allow for better, even full,

realization of these ideals. The way he does this is based on the view of human nature described above, both the moral aspect that represents true human nature for him, and his refusal to separate the moral person and the physiological or material person.

Politics has a moral goal for Xu: the ultimate goal of Ruist politics is to allow people to realize their moral natures as much as possible. This provides a test for good government: a government that represses the moral responses or simply doesn't allow for their full development is not a good government. Government must provide room for the free development of the moral nature, while also encouraging its growth through suitable education. So Xu is not a liberal, if that means endorsing value neutrality. He does not believe government needs to or should be neutral concerning the good human life, but neither can it force a certain view on people. Government can encourage the Ruist view of the person through education, but not use coercive measures to force people to adopt it.

Xu's objection to using coercion to support any moral view, including Ruist values, has two sources. The first is due to what he calls the primary value in Ruist thought: life. He means a biological notion of life primarily, so that caring for the physical self takes priority over caring for the moral self. In other words, coercion and punishment—the power of the law—must not be used to harm the physical body in the name of improving the moral self. The first duties of the government are to refrain from causing harm and provide the conditions for people to satisfy their material needs. Since the moral self cannot be separated from the physiological self, one cannot improve the former by harming the latter. This includes requiring people to deny their basic preferences. This is what he believes Communists do. It is wrong for the government to try to ignore people's preferences, the foremost of which is life. Yet at the same time, he insists that preferences cannot be the basis of morality (as in utilitarianism).

The other reason is that he believes morality has to be freely chosen, not coerced. He frequently quotes *Analects* 2.3: "If you guide the people with decrees and reform them with punishments, they will evade them and have no sense of shame. If you guide them with virtue and reform them with ritual, they will have a sense of shame and correct themselves." The way Xu understands this is government coercion can indeed regulate people's behavior, since they will try to avoid punishment, but

it cannot bring them to realize true morality. As discussed above, this has to be an internal experience, in which the moral person recognizes her moral nature. This means it is something that each individual has to realize themselves. Coercion simply cannot do this. True morality must be realized under conditions of political freedom.<sup>16</sup>

## HOW DEMOCRACY WORKS

The goals of Ruist politics—care for the people’s material welfare and support for their moral development—are captured in the traditional idea of *minben* 民本, the people as foundation. Xu describes how Ruist thinkers urged rulers to put the people’s preferences ahead of their own and do what was best for them. However, they did not have a political structure available to make that happen consistently. Rulers might either fail to understand correctly what the people’s preferences are, or they might know but find it too difficult to ignore their own preferences, which Xu recognizes is a very challenging thing to do. That is what democratic institutions should aim to instantiate: a system that allows the people to make sure their preferences are followed. Traditional Ruism never had this.

The most basic component of democracy for Xu is thus elections, since that is the mechanism by which the people enforce their collective will on the government. The other components of democracy mainly follow from consideration for what is necessary for elections to be effective. Taiwan at the time was formally a democracy, since there were periodic elections, but there was only one party and vote buying was commonplace. Furthermore, the legislature was stacked to support President Jiang, and there was no effective separation of powers. Media were quite restricted as well, as the GMD owned the mass media. Hence, he believes it is necessary to have more political parties, rule of law and separation of powers, and free expression and publication so people can become informed and express their views. Xu’s ideal is for the rulers to have no preferences at all, or at least to act as if they don’t.

In response to criticisms that democracy was inferior to decision making by an educated elite (as the GMD represented themselves)—very close to the position of contemporary Ruist meritocrats—Xu’s response is that scholarship and government are entirely different endeavors. Scholarship or academia, the pursuit of knowledge, is indeed qualitative:

as he says, the opinion of one scientist is worth more than ten thousand ordinary people. But carrying this idea over to politics leads to totalitarianism. In scholarship, the goal is to converge on truth and eliminate falsehood, but through a process of presenting evidence and convincing other scholars of one's view. In politics, however, what will happen is that the government will use its power to enforce its view of the truth and eradicate opponents. This is what was happening in China, and, to a large extent, in Taiwan.

Politics is quantitative: the standard of what is right is what the majority supports. The minority can always try to change majority opinion, and this is one important reason for free expression. But if the majority rejects a certain government policy, then it should not be implemented even if the experts in government disagree. Freedom of thought has to be protected, which means the people must be able to exercise their abilities to make political evaluations and judgments. Respect for the equality represented by universal moral nature requires this. While this may result in suboptimal government policies at some points, there is always the possibility for change. However, this has to come from the people.

Another way Xu makes this point is by distinguishing the form and content of government. Content is the particular proposals, laws, and policies that address specific political issues; form determines how content is decided and implemented; typically, the procedures inscribed in the constitution. In a democratic system, the democratic form sets limits on what content is possible; that is, a law that would dissolve the legislature and give a lifetime executive supreme power would not be possible. Ideally, form determines how content can be advocated, opposed, and realized; the content of government changes but the form does not. He makes this distinction largely in response to claims that Taiwan is a government of the Three Principles of the People, the political ideology of Sun Zhongshan (Yat-sen), father of the Republic of China. As such, realizing the three principles is a higher value than democracy (even though democracy is one of them). Xu's response is that there is no conflict: democracy is the form, and the three principles are one possible content. Democracy is not committed to any particular content (other than that which is necessary to preserve that form). The adoption of any doctrine or policy must go through the democratic process, so the people can choose the three principles if they want, but that has to be a choice made democratically. It cannot be above the democratic process.



## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RUIST DEMOCRACY

Xu makes two overarching points in his political thought. The first is that democracy represents the best opportunity for realizing Ruist political ideas. It is not a guarantee, both because the practice of democracy may not live up to its promise and because his views on putting the form of democracy above any specific content means that it is possible that the electorate will support other content, not Ruist values. He appears to recognize and accept this possibility, though he would surely try to change their views if that happened. For people committed to continuing Chinese culture and Ruism, Xu argues that supporting democracy is part of that.

His second point is that democracy needs to be built on a moral foundation: the Ruist conception of human nature or something very close to it. There is necessarily a question of morality in politics; the two cannot be entirely separated. He finds modern liberalism deeply dissatisfying for attempting to set aside the moral dimension. This treats people like animals, merely pursuing satisfaction of their desires. It is not only an insult to human dignity, it cannot work. Such a conception of human beings cannot provide a stable foundation for democratic theory. He appears to think that this way of thinking about human beings as essentially self-interested at best results in democracy as a *modus vivendi*: people want to be able to pursue their interests with no restraints, but recognize that they have to accept some restrictions to avoid conflict.<sup>17</sup> If they think they can get away with avoiding these restraints and accumulating more power, they have no reason not to.

In Xu's Ruist understanding, people are not only self-interested. We want to care for others and get along with them. Commitment to democracy is necessary to realize important goods in human life. It furthers people's interests, rather than only getting in the way of the pursuit of their desires. Belief in the Ruist conception of human nature thus gives people more reason to support democracy, and hence Xu thinks it will finally have a stable foundation. It makes government into an important source of good, not something to tolerate grudgingly. Whether there are alternatives to the Ruist view of humanity that would achieve the same thing is not something he considers, and it would be an interesting question for further study. Various critics of liberalism have been making similar arguments for years, but Xu stands out for making this point sixty years ago.

## Influence

Xu had virtually no impact on the political situation of his time. He was essentially forced into a second exile in 1969 due to his criticisms of the government and had very little success in encouraging any democratic reforms. Jiang Jieshi died in 1975 and his son Jiang Jinguo became the next president. Jiang Jinguo began to relax political persecutions and tolerate more dissent, though Xu did not live to see this. It is not surprising that Xu proposed this for his epitaph: “Here lies the son of a peasant village who once tried his hand at politics while deeply loathing it—Xu Foguan.”<sup>18</sup> Personal conflicts with members of the liberal group, notably Hu Shi and Yin Haiguang (though Xu reconciled with him at the end of Yin’s life—see chapter 3), meant that there was little cooperation between the liberals and New Ruists even when they shared the goal of democratic reform. This surely weakened both sides.

In academia, philosophy in particular, his influence has also not been that significant. This is not so surprising when he disclaimed being a philosopher and indeed much of his work was on literature, history, and aesthetics. His historical conclusions about early Chinese texts are mostly dated at this point, surpassed by the major recent discoveries of excavated material which has shed tremendous new light on many ancient texts as well as by advances in text criticism. While he had some dedicated students, some of whom edited later publications of his works, he did not inspire later generations of scholars the way Mou Zongsan did.

Where I believe he *could* have influence is helping to reorient what Ruism is about. The growth of academic philosophy in the Sinophone world as well as (some) greater interest in Chinese thought among Western-trained philosophers means that debates have proceeded at a high level of abstraction, delving into metaethical concerns such as what form of ethical theory Ruism is and which characteristics or virtues in Ruism are fundamental and which are derivative. A lesson to draw from Xu’s work is that Ruism is not any kind of ethical theory. It is a philosophy about improved ethical practice: making people better, not refining theoretical arguments. Xu emphasizes that Ruism must be about practice, and practice in the real world. It is something to realize in one’s life. Several contemporary Ruists have expressed concerns about Ruism turning into an academic field. Xu reminds us that it is foremost a way of living.