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Connections Between Confucianism and  
Democracy in Xu Fuguan's Thought:  
An Intercultural Hermeneutics  
徐復觀思想中儒家與民主的連結：  
跨文化詮釋學的分析

Diana Arghirescu  
狄雅娜\*

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**關鍵詞：**徐復觀、蕭公權、保羅·田立克、查爾斯·泰勒、文化預設、  
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\* Professor of Chinese Philosophy, Observatoire de l'Asie de l'Est, University of Québec at Montreal, Canada.  
加拿大魁北克大學蒙特婁分校東亞觀察中心教授

## Abstract

This essay investigates the cultural presuppositions of the innovative way in which Xu Fuguan 徐復觀, answers a major question concerning Chinese culture, asked by Chinese intellectuals since the May Fourth Movement: how best to approach the modernization of China. In the present analysis, I argue that to this end, Xu Fuguan systematically undertook a two-dimensional research project: first, coming to a genuinely reconstructive understanding of the initially Western notion of democracy from within the core of Chinese tradition (Confucianism); second, based on this understanding, building a new historical interpretation of the Chinese past (Confucian thought), thus redefining the Contemporary New Confucians' relation with their own tradition. Both dimensions are cross-cultural, and my intention is to explore in particular a facet of his work, which has not been previously addressed: Xu Fuguan's project as an act of cultural hospitality.

## 摘要

五四運動以來，中國知識份子提出了中國現代化最佳途徑的問題。本文旨在考察徐復觀的解決方案之文化預設。筆者指出，徐復觀系統性地進行了兩個面向的分析：首先，從中國傳統儒家思想的核心出發，對西方民主概念進行建構性的重新認識；其次，透過這個新的認識架構，來考察與詮釋中國的歷史（儒家傳統），並重新定義了當代新儒家與其傳統根源的關係。這兩個面向都具有跨文化特質，本文嘗試探索徐復觀的作品中這個受到忽視的面向：文化之間的相互接納性。

## 1. Introduction

This essay investigates the cultural presuppositions of the innovative way in which Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 (1902-1982), a distinguished member of the group of Contemporary New Confucians (*dangdai xin rujia xuezhe* 當代新儒家學者), answers a major question concerning Chinese culture, asked by Chinese intellectuals since the May Fourth Movement: how best to approach the modernization of China. The work of Xu Fuguan, one of the four signatories to the *Manifesto for a Re-appraisal of Sinology and Reconstruction of Chinese Culture* 為中國文化敬告世界人士宣言：我們對中國學術研究及中國文化與世界文化前途之共同認識, is based on the assumption that Confucian thought and ethics as the heart of Chineseness can be modernized, because “there is nothing in it which is not compatible with the idea of human dignity or rights in modern society.”<sup>1</sup> Xu Fuguan's research focuses on the idea of democracy, mainly on its political dimension. For him, the building of a new China represents a transformation of its traditional culture from within, which predominantly involves establishing a connection between democracy and Confucianism.

In the present analysis, I argue that to this end, Xu Fuguan systematically undertook a two-dimensional research project: first, coming to a genuinely reconstructive understanding of the initially Western notion of democracy from within the core of Chinese tradition (Confucianism); second, based on this understanding, building a new historical interpretation of the Chinese past (Confucian thought), thus redefining the Contemporary New Confucians' relation with their own tradition. Both dimensions are cross-cultural, and my intention is to explore in particular a facet of his work, which has not been previously addressed, and of which Xu Fuguan himself was probably largely

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1 Carson Chang 張君勱, *The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought*, Vol. 2 (New York: Bookman Associates, 1962), p. 433.

unaware, as he never expressed such an intention: Xu Fuguan served as host and his project was as an act of cultural hospitality (let us remember Paul Ricœur's paradigm of linguistic hospitality).<sup>2</sup> By navigating through implicit and explicit Western and Chinese cultural presuppositions, I thus highlight Xu Fuguan's contribution as a cross-cultural interpreter. Despite the 20<sup>th</sup> century context permeated by the intercultural conflict between China and the West, Xu Fuguan's work not only threw a bridge between Confucianism and contemporary Western democracy, but a bridge between Chinese and Western cultures. His research is also original in another sense, as a genuinely Chinese way to address the general issue of making what is foreign one's own.

For this purpose, I draw inspiration from Gadamer's theory of interpretive understanding, which sees the process of interpretation as guided by cultural presuppositions, while I attempt to initiate an intercultural and interdisciplinary encounter between the historian Xu Fuguan, the political scientist Hsiao Kung-chuan 蕭公權 (1897-1981), and the philosophers Paul Tillich 保羅·田立克 (1886-1965) and Charles Taylor 查爾斯·泰勒 (1931-), around the notion of democratic politics and its practical difficulties, as reflected in the Western and Chinese spirits of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

My essay joins the international scholarship that focuses on Xu Fuguan as a major figure in modern Confucian thought: Chen-yang Li 李晨陽,<sup>3</sup> Hong-he Liu 劉鴻鶴,<sup>4</sup> Chun-chieh Huang 黃俊傑,<sup>5</sup> Joseph Chan 陳祖為,<sup>6</sup> David

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2 Paul Ricœur, "Hospitalité langagière," *Sur la traduction* (Paris: Bayard, 2004), pp. 42-43.

3 Chen-yang Li 李晨陽, *The Tao Encounters the West: Explorations in Comparative Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), p. 172.

4 Hong-he Liu 劉鴻鶴, *Confucianism in the Eyes of a Confucian Liberal: Hsü Fu-Kuan's Critical Examination of the Confucian Political Tradition* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

5 Chun-chieh Huang 黃俊傑, *Dongya Ruxue Shiyuzhong de Xu Fuguan ji qi Sixiang* 東亞儒學視域中的徐復觀及其思想 [*Xu Fuguan and His Thought in the Context of East Asian Confucianisms*] (Taipei: Guolitaiwandaxue Chubanzhongxin [National Taiwan University Press], 2010); *Xu Fuguan and His Thought in the Context of East Asian Confucianisms*, Diana Arghirescu (trans.) (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 2019).

6 Joseph Chan 陳祖為, *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 22.

Elstein,<sup>7</sup> Pei-min Ni 倪培民,<sup>8</sup> Sor-hoon Tan 陳素芬,<sup>9</sup> Brooke Ackerly,<sup>10</sup> Albert H. Y. Chan 陳弘毅.<sup>11</sup> Unlike these studies that analyze Xu Fuguan's project within the framework of political philosophy, intellectual history and political science, my work uses the method of philosophical hermeneutics and addresses not the political viability of Xu Fuguan's project, but the cultural presuppositions underlying his specific understanding of the concepts of Confucianism and democracy across Western and Chinese cultures and within the framework of Chinese culture. Starting from these cultural presuppositions I examine the possibility of his project. For this purpose, I use the hermeneutical tools and an intercultural approach.

Therefore, one of the key findings of this hermeneutical study of Xu Fuguan's work is the fact that, actually, there is no single understanding of the initially Western notion of "democracy." Even if one could say that its values and aspirations are relatively universal, its meanings and practices (i.e., East Asian, African, etc.) are culturally dependent and are forged by the interaction between the broad Western concept of "democracy" and its host culture. Obviously, as Xu Fuguan advocates, within the context of East Asian Confucian cultures, the democracy puts on the Confucian habit.

## 2. The purpose of Xu Fuguan's project

Chow Tse-tsung 周策縱 (1916-2007) recalled that Western ideas of

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7 David Elstein, *Democracy in Contemporary Confucian Philosophy* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2014), p. 67.

8 Pei-min Ni 倪培民, "Practical Humanism of Xu Fuguan," in *Contemporary Chinese Philosophy* (eds.), *Chung-ying Cheng and Nicholas Bunnin* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), p. 281.

9 Sor-hoon Tan 陳素芬, *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p.168.

10 Brooke Ackerly, "Is Liberalism the Only Way Toward Democracy?: Confucianism and Democracy," *Political Theory*, 33, 4 (Aug., 2005), pp. 547-576.

11 Albert H.Y. Chan 陳弘毅, "Is Confucianism Compatible with Liberal Constitutional Democracy?," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 34, 2 (June, 2007), pp. 195-216.

democracy and science were important issues in the Chinese cultural debates during and after the May Fourth Movement, which centered on how to promote modernization and “build a new China through intellectual and social reforms.”<sup>12</sup> Xu Fuguan and his group of Contemporary New Confucians defended the preservation of Chineseness and of the Confucian tradition. They continued a complex debate about democracy and modernization, in which John Dewey with his series of lectures delivered in 1919-20 in China,<sup>13</sup> Liang Qi-chao 梁啟超 (1873-1929) and Liang Shu-ming 梁漱溟 (1893-1988)<sup>14</sup> among others, had previously taken part. His project aimed to provide a new cultural foundation for a new Chinese society. Xu argues that the fountainhead of this foundation is not alien (Western), but already existent within Chinese culture. This is an “initial democratic spirit of Chinese culture (*zhongguo wenhua zhong yuanyou de minzhu jingshen* 中國文化中原有的民主精神)” which he claims to have discovered in pre-Qin Confucian thought. He wants to unveil this spirit and make it serve the advancement of Chinese society in the modern world:

I want to revive and dredge the initial democratic spirit of Chinese culture. This is what has been called ‘inheriting the lost way of thinking of ancient sages (*wei wang sheng ji juexue* 為往聖繼絕學). Through making use of this spirit, democratic politics is supported.<sup>15</sup>

In Xu Fuguan’s view, this democratic spirit is an original, purely Chinese attribute, later obscured and polluted by authoritarianism:

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12 Tse-tsung Chow 周策縱, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1967), p. 1.

13 John Dewey, *Lecture in China, 1919-1920*, Robert W. Clopton and Tsuin-chen Ou (trans. & eds.) (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1973), pp. 147-155.

14 Shu-ming Liang 梁漱溟, *Les idées maîtresses de la culture chinoise*, Michel Masson (trans.) (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2010), p. 311.

15 Fu-guan Xu 徐復觀, *Xu Fuguan Zawen Xuji* 徐復觀雜文續集 [*Essays by Xu Fuguan: A Continuation*] (Taipei: Shibao Wenhua Chubangongsi [China Times Publishing Co.], 1981), p. 412. All translations from Xu Fuguan’s works and Chinese classics are my own. The paragraphs from Xu Fuguan’s work analyzed in this essay are also discussed in Huang 2010, but in the specific context of that book.

But because the autocratic regime suppressed Confucian humanism, the latter didn't generate concrete institutions and had only the capacity to alleviate to some degree the ill effects of the system, without being able to eradicate its source of infection.<sup>16</sup>

Consequently, the first, interpretive dimension of his project, i.e., understanding the idea of democracy and its political functioning, embodies Xu's effort to remove what he sees as the long-term corrupting effects of the traditional Chinese autocracy, to clean the foundation of Chinese culture and make perceptible within it the source of this never-developed initial spirit, set aside as early as the advent of the Qin dynasty:

Those wanting to discuss present-day Chinese culture must, first, clearly distinguish what is the original aspect of Chinese culture, and what is its polluted aspect, under the coercion of an autocratic regime. To restore Chinese culture, one must first declare war on the autocratic regime. Afterwards, Chinese culture can continue to take responsibility for its grand mission towards the whole of humanity.<sup>17</sup>

This first dimension of his project is accompanied by a second, reconstructive dimension: rebuilding contemporary Confucianism by forming a connection between Confucianism and democracy to serve as the foundational groundwork for restructuring modern Chinese culture and society.

On one hand, as he readily admits, Xu's starting point is the notion of democracy as he understands it from the Japanese translations of Western works,<sup>18</sup> and, it must also be added, through his own cultural Chinese (Confucian)

16 Fu-guan Xu, *Xueshu yu Zhengzhi zhi jia* 學術與政治之間 [Between Research and Politics] (Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng Shuju [Student Book Co., Ltd.], 1980), pp. 394-395.

17 Fu-guan Xu, Hsin-i Hsiao 蕭欣義 (ed.), *Rujia Zhengzhi Sixiang yu Minzhu Ziyou Renquan* 儒家政治思想與民主自由人權 [Confucian Political Thought and Democracy, Freedom and Human Rights] (Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng Shuju, 1988), p. 162.

18 "Every year, I buy from Japan human science books translated into Japanese," Xu Fuguan

presuppositions. On the other hand, Xu nevertheless is convinced he has discovered an “initial democratic spirit of Chinese culture” already present in ancient Confucianism. The combination of the two premises clearly implies that he undertakes this effort of understanding democracy, starting from within the context of pre-Qin Confucianism, as a particular kind of interpreter, one who performs a simultaneously two-dimensional interpretation, i.e., one that is cross-cultural (regarding Western and Chinese notions of democracy) and the other historical (the perception of Confucian tradition before him, and his specific interpretation of ancient Chinese Confucianism). This essay focuses on the first facet of his interpretive work, while keeping in mind that both facets are intertwined and concurrent.

### 3. Xu Fuguan’s project as a hermeneutic experience

As a cross-cultural interpreter of democracy, Xu participates in a symbolic communication with Western culture concerning this notion. In other words, as suggested below, he goes beyond the simple explication of the meaning of democracy, its ordinary paraphrase and translation, and beyond the viewpoint of “understanding the content” of the Western notion of democracy. The task he performs is comparable to what Habermas calls a “reconstructive understanding”,<sup>19</sup> i.e., an attempt to discover the rules according to which the content of the notion of democracy is constructed in Western culture. As argued further, these rules or “generative structures,”<sup>20</sup> essentially concern an implicit foreknowledge coming from the cultural background and the structure of the language, in this case the Western cultural presuppositions of the notion of

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mentions, while explaining that he “likes to learn something from those Western classics translated into Japanese” Fu-guan Xu, *Xu Fuguan Wencun* 徐復觀文存 [*Xu Fuguan’s Works*] (Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng Shuju, 1991), pp. 196-250.

19 Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, Thomas McCarthy (trans.) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), p. 12.

20 For a theoretical analysis of this “reconstructive understanding” and its formation, in the Western cultural context, without a cross-cultural extension, *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

democracy. Xu Fuguan understands these through reconstructing them in the Chinese context.

At the same time, it can be said that, as a historical interpreter of pre-Qin Confucianism, Xu redefines modern Chinese culture's relation with tradition, when arguing that the Confucian tradition constitutes a strong foundation for the present. Using Gadamer's theory of preunderstanding, it can be said that Xu Fuguan's research paradigm "is not the discovery of facts but the peculiar fusion of memory (i.e., ancient Confucian thought) and expectation (i.e., the existence of a democratic spirit in ancient Confucianism) into a whole."<sup>21</sup> That is, Xu's engagement with the first interpretative level of the notion of democracy bears witness to the existence, at the second level, of an expectation to recover an initial democratic spirit in pre-Qin Confucianism. His Confucianism is essentially related to subjectivity (Xu Fuguan's), and lives with historical individuals (because it is continuously reinterpreted from the pre-Qin period to 20<sup>th</sup> century China). Still, as a result of his participation in the Confucian tradition, which is not only a research topic but a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated (see Gadamer's theory of understanding),<sup>22</sup> his interpretation overcomes the polarity subjective-objective. His project of connecting Confucianism and democracy is original precisely because in it, Confucian tradition is not a static precondition, but is produced and reconstructed, insofar as Xu participates in its evolution and determines it.

The next part presents three major dimensions of this initial democratic spirit that Xu wishes to restore so that he can use them thereafter as connecting points between Confucianism and democracy. Equally, it attempts to demonstrate that, based on these components, Xu builds a so-called reconstructive understanding of democracy within the Chinese context.

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21 Hang-Heorg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 225.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 302.

#### 4. The first stage of Xu Fuguan's project: Restoring the "initial democratic spirit of Chinese culture"

Looking for this spirit in ancient Confucian thought is Xu's starting point:

The most important thing to do now is to discover which dimension of Chinese culture can be connected to democracy. In many of my articles, I've shown that following the authentic spirit of Confucius' and Mencius' thought requires advancing democracy in politics.<sup>23</sup>

In Xu's view, this restoration project implies uncovering what he considers to be the major dimensions of this initial democratic spirit: the quest for peace, the political importance of the people, and the ideal of self-awareness and equality.

##### 4.1 The quest for peace

For Xu, an important dimension of democratic politics is the ever-present Confucian ideal of "establishing peace for the generations to come (*wei wanshi kai taiping* 為萬世開太平)." "If the politics is not democratic," Xu stresses, "then there is no peace."<sup>24</sup> A Chinese cultural presupposition is incorporated in this perspective. When describing building peace as a major outcome of a future Confucian democracy, Xu directly connects the modern Western notion of democracy with the ancient ideal of good governance of the classic *Great Learning*, i.e., "establishing peace in the world through governing one's country well (*guo zhi er hou tianxia ping* 國治而後天下平)."

The old idea of preserving peace that Xu revisits comes from a leitmotif deeply ingrained in Chinese thought, which celebrates universal life: the organic character of the relationships between members of society that springs from the belief in an intrinsic bond between all individuals, members of the living body of

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23 Fu-guan Xu, *Xu Fuguan Zawen Xuji*, p. 412.

24 Ibid., pp. 412-413.

nature. The rulers' effort to preserve peace is the equivalent of the endeavor of heaven to protect the life of this common body. This is also one of the major ideas developed by the Song dynasty Neo-Confucians. In his commentary on the *Zhongyong Zhangju* (中庸章句 *Doctrine of the Mean in Chapters and Verses*), Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) describes the functioning of heaven as that of a caregiver and nurturer, which assumes responsibility for assisting all and maintaining peace in the world. Ensuring peace means for him eliminating the opposition between the different realities of individual constituents, so that they don't impede each other but instead support each other:

Heaven covers, earth supports. The ten thousand things grow together within the entity heaven-earth without harming each other. The four seasons unfold, and sun and moon harmonize themselves to enlighten the universe without impeding each other.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, like the effect of the activity of heaven-earth, the absolute duty of the government is to take care of people, to nourish them, and preserve the peace of the country.

Accordingly, the perfect democracy to serve as the foundation of a long-lasting peace should be a steady one—as stable as life, which is perceived as continuous and indestructible. Xu sees Confucian thought as the necessary philosophical underpinning to correct the unsteadiness of Western democracy.

## 4.2 The political importance of the people

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25 Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Zhongyong Zhangju* 中庸章句 [*Doctrine of the Mean in Chapters and Verses*], in Jie-ren Zhu 朱傑人, Zuo-zhi Yan 嚴佐之 and Yong-xiang Liu 劉永翔 (eds.), *Zhuzi Quanshu* 朱子全書 [*The Collected Works of Master Zhu*] (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe & Hefei: Anhui Jiaoyu Chubanshe), Vol. 6, p. 56.

Xu Fuguan adopts the Mencian political idea that “the people are important (*ming wei gui* 民為貴),”<sup>26</sup> also endorsed by Zhu Xi in *Mengzi Jizhu* 孟子集注 [*Collected Commentaries on the Mencius*] (“the people are the root of the country [*guo yi min wei ben* 國以民為本]),”<sup>27</sup> as another non-developed dimension of this democratic spirit. He sees in this ancient notion an incipient source of the democratic idea of “rule by the people,” which he says was distorted by the autocratic regime when the latter established the elite class of “those who govern by thinking for the people.” It is possible, in his view, to correct this falsification, and make the initial democratic seed ready to sprout by reintroducing the notion that “the people” are the main political actors and it is from their perspective that the legitimacy of rule should be judged:

We must change the direction of Confucianism and assess its theories from the point of view of the governed. First, the political actor (*zhengzhi de zhuti* 政治的主體) must leave the sphere of those who govern by thinking for the people, and must once again become one of the people. [...] Doing so transforms the traditional idea of the Chinese governors who claim that “the people are the root of the country (*min ben* 民本)” into a democracy where the people on their own two feet are their own masters (*ziji zhanqilai de minzhu* 自己站起來的民主).<sup>28</sup>

In other words, the rulers hold and execute moral authority and political power, while the people are the foundation and the source of this power, as all political power must be exercised ultimately for their benefit.

In this context, an extremely original conception that Xu Fuguan puts forward is his notion of “double subjectivity (*er zhong de zhutixing*

26 *Mengzi* 孟子 [*Mencius*], Book 7B, “Jinxin xia 盡心下 [Exhausting The Mind Part A],” in Zhu Xi, *Mengzi Jizhu* 孟子集注 [*Collected Commentaries on the Mencius*], *Zhuzi Quanshu*, Vol. 6, p. 447.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Fu-guan Xu, *Xueshu yu Zhengzhi zhi jia*, p. 59.

二重的主體性), or the “conflict between the two types of political actors (ruler and people) (*er zhong zhutixing de maodun* 二重主體性的矛盾).” This creative idea identifies the existence of a discrepancy between the Chinese political reality (autocratic regime) and the political theory (Confucianism). It not only gives an effective explanation of how this incipient democratic dimension was distorted by the autocratic regime, but also provides concrete practical guidance on how to resuscitate what he sees as the authentically Chinese democratic spirit, and convert it into the driving force for contemporary Chinese democracy. In the following paragraph, Xu Fuguan examines this double political subjectivity, i.e., the “sovereign’s political subjectivity (*renjun zai zhengzhi zhong de zhutixing* 人君在政治中的主體性)”——that is, the sovereign’s preferences are the central focus or “subject” of political reality, and the “people’s subjectivity (*tianxia de zhutixing* 天下的主體性)”——that is, the people are the central focus or “subject” of the Chinese political thought. Xu Fuguan draws attention to their insurmountable conflict:

Yet, the Chinese political reality of these several thousands of years was the autocratic regime in which the source of political power is the sovereign and not the people. That is why, in reality, the sovereign was the real subject of politics. [...] The people are the subject of political theory (政治的理念，民才是主體), but the sovereign is still the subject matter, in other words, the central focus of political reality (政治的現實，則君又是主體). This kind of double subjectivity sets up an irreconcilable opposition (這種二重的主體性，便是無可調和的對立). The expression of these different levels of opposition is reflected in the order and the disorder, the rising and the decline of each of the dynasties in history. This is why Chinese political thought always considered eliminating the sovereign’s political “subjectivity” and exposed in a remarkable way the people’s “subjectivity,” thus removing the above-mentioned opposition. The instruments through

which the sovereign exerts his subjectivity are his preferences and opinions (*haowu yu caizhi* 好惡與才智). All individuals have preferences, and opinions are also a precious thing for everybody. But, because the sovereign possesses the highest political power, he expresses his preferences and opinions through his supreme political power; they thus form his political subjectivity. By acting in this way, he suppresses the preferences and opinions of all others, and equally, suppresses their political subjectivity.<sup>29</sup>

Xu Fuguan thus suggests that in order to transcend this conflict and give precedence to the “people’s subjectivity,” the leaders should abandon their personal preferences and opinions in order to serve the people’s preferences and opinions. Clearly, in his Confucian view, this effort implies a continuous moral education of the leaders. The rulers’ self-cultivation includes constantly becoming more aware of one’s desires and eliminating them in order to deal impartially with social and political affairs (see the ideal of the classic *Daxue* 大學 [Great Learning] and Zhu Xi’s commentary *Daxue Zhangju* 大學章句 [Great Learning in Chapters and Verses]).<sup>30</sup> In his monography dedicated to Xu Fuguan, Chun-chieh Huang cites Xu Fuguan’s article “Zhongguo de Zhidao——du Lu Xuangong Zhuanji shuhou 中國的治道——讀陸宣公傳集書後 [The statesmanship of China——after reading the compilation of Lu Xuangong’s commentaries]”. In this article, Xu Fuguan develops his idea of serving the people, which echoes the process described in the *Daxue*: Chinese political thought requires first that the sovereign morally transform himself by abandoning his personal opinions and preferences in order to serve the people’s opinions and preferences. When discussing the statesmanship of an autocratic regime, if it is impossible to achieve this level of depth, then the essential conflict existing

29 Fu-guan Xu, “Zhongguo de Zhidao 中國的治道 [The Statesmanship of China],” in Hsin-i Hsiao (ed.), *Zhengzhi Sixiang yu Minzhu Ziyou Renquan*, pp. 218-219.

30 For a commentary on this topic, see Diana Arghirescu, “Zhu Xi’s Spirituality: A New Interpretation of The Great Learning,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 39, 2 (Aug., 2012), pp. 272-289.

between the two types of political actors cannot be eliminated, and good governance is impossible to achieve.<sup>31</sup> Here, Xu Fuguan provides a concrete example of how the Confucian morality can serve as a foundation for democracy.

It must be emphasized that this idea that people are important and the root of the country (*min ben* 民本), from which Xu Fuguan builds his project of the Confucian democracy, has been one of the core ideas of Confucianism since ancient times. The benevolent governance, i.e., virtue-based power (*dezhi* 德治), lies at the heart of ancient Confucianism. Confucius, Mencius and Xunzi have all contributed to its growth. As above mentioned, Mencius paid special attention to it. Hsiao Kung-chuan explains in modern terms that “Mencius believed that ultimate sovereignty lay with the people”:

The people's acceptance or repudiation should be the ultimate standard for determining a change of political power, or the adoption or abandonment of any item of governmental policy.<sup>32</sup>

Mencius stresses that the people do not have an absolute duty of obedience to the leaders. It is only when governance is based on humanity (*ren* 仁) that “the people love their rulers as their parents for whom they are ready to die.”<sup>33</sup> Hsiao Kung-chuan reminds us that “the opinion [disapproval] of the people was capable of only a passive manifestation”,<sup>34</sup> i.e., not loving their leaders, neither coming to their rescue nor dying for them. Indeed, Mencius clearly states that “only the officer designated by heaven can attack the oppressive sovereign.”<sup>35</sup> As Hsiao stresses, in Mencius view, the people have no right to overthrow the oppressive

31 Chun-chieh Huang, *Dongya Ruxue Shiyuzhong de Xu Fuguan ji qi Sixiang*, p. 218.

32 Kung-chuan Hsiao 蕭公權, *A History of Chinese Political Thought*, Vol. 1, F. W. Mote (trans.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 156, 158.

33 *Mengzi*, Book 1B, “Liang Hui Wang xia 梁惠王下 [King Hui of Liang Part B],” in Zhu Xi, *Mengzi Jizhu*, p. 272.

34 Kung-chuan Hsiao, *A History of Chinese Political Thought*, Vol. 1, p. 159.

35 *Mengzi*, Book 2B, “Gongsun Chou xia 公孫丑下,” in Zhu Xi, *Mengzi Jizhu*, p. 300.

government through rebellious action. This perspective values peace above all else, and consequently emphasizes the absence of struggle.

It must be remembered that the starting point of Mencius' theory is Confucius' specific perspective on the benevolent government. According to Confucius (the classic *Daxue*), the good governance based on the people as the root of the state implies two capital correlative virtues of the ruler: tenderness (*ci* 慈) (ethic of care) and righteousness, i.e., the capacity of squaring facts and conduct (*xiejuzhidao* 絜矩之道 [ethic of impartiality]). Both are anchored in the universe of the family.

The first is a form of kindness that incarnates parental tenderness:

Maternal tenderness (*ci* 慈) is what one makes use of to set the people to work. In the *Announcement to Kang* (*Shujing* 書經) it is described “as taking care of a newborn baby.”<sup>36</sup>

The attachment bond between a mother and her newborn is an enduring emotional connection that prepares the child to acquire a sense of reciprocity, solidarity and security. Consequently, in this context, the capacity to take care of people implies access to a higher level of comprehension and receptivity towards the perspectives and needs of others. The *Great Learning* (*Daxue Zhangju*, zhang 10) explains that, by actualizing this virtue, the noble person naturally induces, due to an effect of resonance, this sense of reciprocity, and therefore of gratitude in the minds of others:

In the *Classic of Poetry* it is said: “Oh, how much-beloved is this sovereign! He is the father and mother of the people.” He loves what

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36 Zhu Xi, *Daxue Zhangju* 大學章句 [*Great Learning in Chapters and Verses*], in *Zhuzi Quanshu*, Vol. 6, p. 23.

the people love and rejects what the people reject. This is what is understood by being the father and mother of the people.<sup>37</sup>

This abovementioned first virtue of the ruler noble man—parental goodness toward his people—ensures the unity of human space because it awakens filial piety, respect and docility, in the inner-self of each member of the community.

In the *Daxue Zhangju*, zhang 10, Zhu Xi makes clear that “keeping the heart of every individual without ever losing it (*cun ci xin er bushi* 存此心而不失)” means “winning the multitudes (*dezhong* 得眾), and winning the country (*deguo* 得國).”<sup>38</sup> Thus, winning the people’s hearts means the capacity of the ruler to generate the virtue of trust within the hearts of the people. At this stage, governance is no longer based on social conventions but on reaching the people’s hearts so that all community members—both governors and governed—act with trust, loyalty, gratitude and respect, thereby transcending habitual social conventions and preserving mutual relations. In this context, good governance is based on the leaders’ accomplishment of self-development.

The second dimension of the Confucian good governance relates to the other capacity of the eminent ruler that is complementary to parental softness—his righteousness (i.e., his rigor or impartiality), cultivated through his behavior. Concretely, rigor manifests as a constant vigilance (*shen* 慎)<sup>39</sup> or constant wakefulness in which the noble man resides in order not to yield to the slightest bias. In the context of the *Daxue*, zhang 10, this quality is portrayed as follows: “the method mastered by the noble man consists of squaring the facts and conduct.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore, it focuses on the rectitude of actions. Zhu Xi explains that

37 Zhu Xi, *Daxue Zhangju*, p. 24.

38 Ibid., p. 25.

39 Vigilance (concern, respect, attention, wakefulness) is one of main themes developed by the *Zhongyong* and interpreted by Zhu Xi. See *Zhongyong Zhangju* 1. See Diana Arghirescu, *De la continuité dynamique dans l'univers confucéen, Lecture néoconfucéenne du Zhongyong* 中庸 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2013), pp. 45-95.

40 “君子有絮矩之道也,” in Zhu Xi, *Daxue Zhangju*, zhang 10, p. 24.

the square is an instrument used to draw the square form. This geometrical reference symbolizes an equanimous and impartial ruler, who is the center of his community:

What I don't like in the way those above treat us, I do not do unto those at the bottom. What I don't like in the way those at the bottom treat us, I do not do when serving those above. What I don't like in the way those who came before treat us, I do not do unto those who will come after. What I don't like in the way the younger treat us, I do not do unto elders. What I don't like in the way people standing to my left treat me, I do not do unto those standing to my right. What I don't like in the way people standing to my right treat me, I do not do unto those standing to my left. This is what squaring the facts and conduct is all about.<sup>41</sup>

Obviously, Xu Fuguan is inspired by the two components of Confucius' interpretation of the good governance, i.e., the previously mentioned ethic of care and ethic of impartiality, and by Mencius' unfolding of the idea of "people as root." He thus remains faithful to these ancient Confucian developments and understands them as relevant to and prescriptive for the Chinese contemporary context. His project proposes to develop a future democratic politics through: first, transforming the traditional idea of the people as root of the country into a practice of democratic politics, where the people are *de facto* the political actors; second, urging those who govern to constantly pursue Confucian moral education based on the two pivotal virtues, i.e., care and impartiality.

He stresses the necessity for "reasonableness" both immediately in the battle that the future democratic politics must first carry on, as well as later, in the ongoing conciliation between those who think for the people and the people themselves once democracy has been established: For this reason, it is necessary

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41 Zhu Xi, *Daxue Zhangju*, p. 24.

for future politics to first fight a reasonable battle (*heli de zheng* 合理的爭), which, thereafter, might lead to a reasonable conciliation (*heli de buzheng* 合理的不爭).”<sup>42</sup> This is how Xu Fuguan builds a so-called reconstructive understanding of the notion of democracy, based on the Chinese cultural presupposition of the “people as root,” when presenting Mencius’ idea of the importance of the people as source of a democratic view. His interpretation is different from the Western idea of democracy, which involves, as illustrated below, the Western presupposition that the sovereignty of the people manifests actively, and starts with revolutionary struggle. It is worth remembering with Paul Tillich that modern Western democracy was prepared by a long revolutionary period (16<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> c.), and accomplished by the bourgeois revolutions.<sup>43</sup> The latter embodied a struggle against feudalism and all forms of authoritarianism. The nature of the change suggested by Xu is peaceful, or as he says, “reasonable” (see also Part 5.2). This is so not only because of the pacifying virtue of Confucian morality, but also because his project of renewing Chinese culture through connecting Confucianism and democracy is, above all, not the result of struggle, but the responsibility of the fundamentally transformed 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese intellectuals,<sup>44</sup> the modern quasi-equivalent of the Mencian class of those “working with their heart-minds (*lao xin zhe* 勞心者).”<sup>45</sup>

### 4.3 Self-awareness and equality

Another major dimension of the “initial democratic spirit of Chinese culture” that Xu seeks to unveil in his work is the idea of “self-awareness (*wo de zijue* 我的自覺)” and its correlative, equality. For this purpose, he starts from a certain Western idea of self-awareness. Next, he reconstructs its meaning in the Chinese

42 Fu-guan Xu, *Xueshu yu Zhengzhi zhi jia*, p. 60.

43 Paul Tillich, *The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1988), pp. 4-5.

44 On the mission of the Chinese intellectuals, see Chun-chieh Huang, *Dongya Ruxue Shi yuzhong de Xu Fuguan ji qi Sixiang*, pp. 38-39.

45 *Mengzi*, Book 3A, “Teng Wen Gong shang 滕文公上 [Duke Wen of Teng Part A],” in Zhu Xi, *Mengzi Jizhu*, pp. 314-315.

cultural context by identifying the source of a similar term in the notion of “concerned consciousness (*youhuan yishi* 憂患意識)” that he is first made aware of in the classic *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚書).

Xu Fuguan discovers the origin of the individual self in ancient China in the Confucian spirit of humanity (*ren* 仁), a notion that took shape at the beginning of the Spring and Autumn period. However, in Xu’s view, the understanding of the spirit of humanity as an expression of the individual self is based on the Chinese cultural presupposition of the inherent relationship between individuals, on the continuity between the inner life and external reality of each individual, on the absence of opposition or separation between individuals and society. In this context, discovering the individual self is precisely becoming fully aware of the existence of a connection between beings. Xu Fuguan adheres to this central idea of the Song dynasty Neo-Confucians, who explain this bond in terms of the principle of coherence (*li* 理), i.e., the moral natural dimension that heaven bestows to everyone:

My connection with other individuals and things consists not only of the activity of knowing the human beings and the external things, but also of the effort of progressing in discovering myself, of transforming my physiological self into a self endowed with moral reasoning (*shengli de wo zhuanhua wei daode lixing zhi wo* 生理的我轉化為道德理性之我). Thus, other individuals and things, which initially were my external reality, fuse with me to form a unity.<sup>46</sup>

Consequently, his self-awareness presupposes solidarity and mediation, what Xu stresses as the middle way, and not independence, adversarial procedures, or the self-reliance of each individual as in Western individual

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46 Fuguan Xu, *Zhongguo Sixiangshi Lunji Xubian* 中國思想史論集續編 [Collection on Chinese History of Thought: A Continuation] (Taipei: Shibao Wenhua Chubangongsi, 1982), p. 570.

awareness—the humanistic theory of the Renaissance which secularized the communitarian Christian perspective, provoked its decline in strength over time, and laid the foundations of Western democracy:

The notion of one's self (*ziwo* 自我) discovered and developed by Confucius refers to the spirit of humanity. [...] Humanity is a moral state of mind (*yi zhong daode jingshen zhuangtai* 一種道德精神狀態) that emanates from the individual's inner life. This is why it is to be found naturally there. [...] The middle way (*Zhongyong* 中庸) is not rooted in the lot of heaven, but in human nature. Taking these premises, the individual next pursues the fulfillment of his own nature (*jin ji zhi xing* 盡己之性), then the fulfillment of the nature of all mankind, and finally the fulfillment of the nature of external things (*jin wu zhi xing* 盡物之性). This process is the ascension and the accomplishment of oneself. And out of it grows a human world endowed with an organic morality (*daode youji ti de renwen shijie* 道德有機體的人文世界).<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, in the above-mentioned notion of “concerned consciousness,” Xu discovers a Chinese traditional source of an idea of self-awareness that he sees as being close to the Western concept of selfhood associated with democracy. According to Xu Fuguan, this concept emerged in the historical and political context of the defeat by the Zhou (周, 1046-256 BC) of the Shang (Yin, 殷) dynasty (1600-1046 BC):

The Zhou people did change the mandate of the Yin; in other words, they became the new winners. However, what one understands from reading the texts and documents from the beginning of the Zhou dynasty does not give the impression of a high-and-mighty atmosphere

47 Fuguan Xu, *Zhongguo Sixiangshi Lunji Xubian*, p. 573.

that characterizes most nations after winning a war. The feeling reflected in those texts appears more like what the Classic *Yizhuan* called a “concerned (*youhuan* 憂患)” consciousness. [...] The formation of a concerned state of mind is precisely the result of the rulers’ reflection, at a given moment, on chance or bad luck, on success or failure. While reflecting on the political change they have caused, the Zhou elites have thus discovered the close link existing between, on one hand, chance or bad luck, success or failure, and on the other hand, the rulers’ behavior. In this way, they learned how to determine responsibility and identify those responsible.”<sup>48</sup>

The Zhou eliminate by force the last tyrant of the Yin, thus destroying the house of Yin and creating their new dynasty based on violence and not on humanity. They are aware, remarks Xu Fuguan, that they bear the responsibility of eliminating the Yin, and they fear the possible consequences of their faulty behavior.

For him, this consciousness is evidence of the emergence of what he perceives as a Chinese humanist spirit of the early period, manifested as “the individual self-awareness of every human being (*ren zhi zijue* 人之自覺)” and as “the responsibility that each bears for his own behavior (*ren renwei ziji fuze* 人人為自己負責).” Concealed in this consciousness, he also sees a “spirit of equality (*pingdeng de linian* 平等的理念)”: people are equal because everyone is entirely responsible for one’s own behavior.<sup>49</sup> According to Xu Fuguan, Confucius was the one who identified this spirit of equality, which never managed to materialize afterward:

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48 Fuguan Xu, *Zhongguo Renxinglunshi: Xian Qin Pian* 中國人性論史·先秦篇 [A Historical Essay on Chinese Human Nature: The Pre-Qin Period] (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu Yinshuguan [The Commercial Press, Ltd.], 1969), pp. 20-21.

49 See also Chun-chieh Huang, *Dongya Ruxue Shiyuzhong de Xu Fuguan ji qi Sixiang*, p. 193.

In the history of Chinese culture, Confucius was responsible for discovering a universal world where there was no inequality between human beings. He was the one who accepted this idea of their equality, namely the fact that all individuals belong to a single species, the human species. In reality, the embryo of this vision was already present with the thought at the beginning of the Zhou, which combined the notion of the mandate of heaven (*tianming* 天命) with that of the mandate of the people (*minming* 民命). However, this archetype as a thought pattern had not been able to develop and clarify because, in reality, the mandate was the prerogative of the upper classes of the rulers.<sup>50</sup>

The background of this self-awareness and equality is obviously a perfect interweave of moral and social life, an organic unity, a system within which the individuals are interacting elements. Under the influence of his contemporary objective, i.e., building a reconstructive understanding of democracy with Confucian morality as its foundation, Xu Fuguan identifies the presence of a “concerned consciousness” in the *Shangshu* as the hallmark of a new stage in the development of the responsible agent. This consciousness holds the individual responsible for his actions, and according to Xu Fuguan, its presence is evidence that the individual agent is independent, i.e., must face up to his responsibilities, recognize his motives within himself and fully understand the consequences. He interprets this consciousness as an implicit source of autonomy, responsibility and equality—the root of an original democratic spirit of Chinese culture. Yet, one could also understand this “concerned consciousness,” not as a sign of such a clear separation from religious culture and evidence that everyone bears the consequences and accepts responsibility for one’s own behavior, as Xu Fuguan perceived it, but rather as the notion of responsibility in Greek tragedy,<sup>51</sup> a

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50 Fuguan Xu, *Zhongguo Renxinglunshi: Xian Qin Pian*, pp. 64-65.

51 See Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1972).

border zone where two levels are simultaneously distinct, inseparable, and in tension: the human level (individual behavior and responsibility of the Yin) and the heavenly level (the mandate of heaven, which eventually will sanction the violent behavior of conquerors).

## 5. The second stage of Xu Fuguan's project: connecting Confucianism and democracy

### 5.1 Achieving individual self-awareness and moral consciousness

Even if Xu Fuguan finds this incipient potential of self-awareness in ancient Confucianism, he recalls that this dimension, which he considers necessary for the emergence of democracy, is lacking in Chinese history, and calls for its development, but from a Confucian moral base:

In a nutshell, in order to take care of Confucian political thought, one should start by replacing the rulers with the governed as its central point for all reflection, and one should also accomplish individual self-awareness (*geti de zijue* 個體的自覺), which our national history has omitted. Thus, democracy could be supported by the renaissance of Confucian spirit, and Confucian thought could materialize as an institutional structure due to the establishment of democracy.<sup>52</sup>

Let us take a closer look at Xu's cultural presuppositions present in this approach.

Paul Tillich, a Western contemporary of Xu Fuguan, reflected on the premises and future of Western democracy, highlighting the revolutionary struggle out of which Western democracy was born and acknowledging the

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52 Fu-guan Xu, *Xueshu yu Zhengzhi zhi jia*, pp. 59-60.

autonomy of every individual, in his religious as well as secular life, as the main foundation of Western revolutionary struggle.<sup>53</sup> Xu Fuguan also makes reference to this notion of autonomy. He interprets it in terms of “self-awareness,” the seeds of which he finds in Zhou culture, and also acknowledges the importance of the initial struggle as the catalyst of Western self-awareness:

Modern Western democracy begins in “self-awareness awareness (*wo de zijue* 我的自覺)”. From a political perspective, each individual’s self-awareness manifests itself as an affirmation and a struggle for one’s own independent and autonomous “right of subsistence,” in relation with all others and, above all, with the governors.<sup>54</sup>

However, unlike the self-awareness in Western history, which grows due to a continuous struggle (the ever-present issue of the tension between individuals and community), Xu Fuguan envisions—from the Confucian communitarian perspective and the abovementioned Chinese cultural presupposition that values harmony, peace and the absence of struggle—a Confucian democracy, a “stable” one, where self-awareness does not imply assuming struggle, nor competition, but instead involves the development of a Confucian moral consciousness:

I think that only through increasing acceptance of Confucian thought will democracy be able to strengthen its base and put into practice its highest values. Because, in a democracy, what is most important is that struggle must give place to competition. Thus, the common well-being is the result of the accumulation of individual interest. But in this case, the absence of struggle and the common good are, in reality, the constrained outcome of mutual constraints, and not of human

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53 Paul Tillich, *The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society*, p. 4.

54 Fu-guan Xu, *Xueshu yu Zhengzhi zhi jia*, p. 53.

conscience or personal moral sense. Hence, the resultant democracy is unstable (*bu lao* 不牢).<sup>55</sup>

Xu Fuguan's understanding of the instability of modern Western democracy is based here on a specific idea of self-awareness acquired through struggle, and he sees its goal, i.e., the common well-being, as short-lived because it is based on mutual constraints. Using his theory of the "principle of automatic harmony," Paul Tillich identifies from a Western perspective the same shortcoming. In his essay from 1946, "The World Situation," Tillich explains that the present situation is the outcome of the rise, triumph and crisis of bourgeois society, and he describes this process using a "principle of automatic harmony" that, he notes, was presupposed at the beginning of this process, but turned out to be false at its last stage. Tillich defines this principle in the following terms:

The belief that the liberation of reason in every person would lead to the realization of a universal humanity and to a system of harmony between individuals and society. Reason in each individual would be discovered to be in harmony with reason in every other individual. This principle of automatic harmony found expression in every realm of life.<sup>56</sup>

Tillich's "reason" in this context shares similarities with Xu's "self-awareness." He further explains the initial functioning of his principle, in terms that resonate with Xu's above-cited paragraph:

In the economic realm it was believed that the welfare of all would be best served by the unrestrained pursuit by each individual of his own economic interests; the common good would be safeguarded by the "laws of the market" and their automatic functioning [...]. In the

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55 Fu-guan Xu, *Xueshu yu Zhengzhi zhi jia*, pp. 53-54.

56 Paul Tillich, *The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society*, p. 5.

political realm, it was supposed that the political judgment of each citizen would lead automatically to correct political decisions by a majority of citizens; community of interest would assure sound democratic procedures.<sup>57</sup>

When noting that “the common well-being is the result of the accumulation of individual interest” in what he calls an unstable democracy and its competitive performance context based on “mutual constraints,” Xu, in fact, agrees with Paul Tillich’s view and implicitly acknowledges, from a different perspective, the existence of this conviction in an automatic harmony between individual and general interest that was the major belief during the rise and triumph of Western bourgeois society.

Tillich also certainly agrees with Xu’s critique of the fragility (unsteadiness) of modern Western democracy, when explaining how the confidence in this automatic harmony collapsed in industrial-democratic society. Yet, his vision of democracy embodies the presupposition of revolutionary effort and of individually distinct but balanced self-interests, nothing similar to an overall coherence between self-interests resulting from the sense of belonging to a common principle, as implied by Xu in his “personal moral sense”:

Democracy presupposes——Tillich stresses——a natural harmony between the different interests and, therefore, the likelihood of a satisfactory balance between them. When this balance is destroyed, democracy no longer works. More particularly, democracy is successful so long as the interests of different groups are harmonious to such degree that the minority prefers acceptance of the majority decision to a revolutionary effort to overthrow it. When the point is

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57 Paul Tillich, *The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society*, p. 4.

reached where the minority no longer accepts the majority decision, democratic procedure fails.<sup>58</sup>

A difficulty posed by Xu Fuguan's Chinese reconstruction of the understanding of democracy, one we are able to see accurately only nowadays, is his confidence in developing self-awareness as a prerequisite for establishing a democratic politics. Back in his time, without the benefit of our hindsight, he emphasized the bright side of this self-awareness, and thinks that correcting its dark side, associated with struggle and instability, can easily be accomplished by means of developing Confucian moral consciousness. This theoretical project proves difficult to put into practice for the following reasons. First, Xu fails to see the very insoluble tension between a moral horizon (Confucian or Christian) and the development of self-awareness in the modern democratic and technical society. Instead of simply contributing to a common well-being as a simple sum of individual well-beings, according to the principle of automatic harmony, this "dark side" of self-awareness evolved towards a real "centering on the self." The by-product of this process is an automatic fading of moral horizons, which, as Taylor notes, "flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society."<sup>59</sup> Individual self-awareness evolved into the present culture of self-fulfillment, in which "the various associations and communities in which the person enters are," Taylor reminds us, "purely instrumental in their significance."<sup>60</sup>

Thus, the evolution of Western democracy produced the replacement of the initial principle of automatic harmony, which was the expression of an initial Western humanistic reason, with the principle of self-fulfillment. As Taylor notes:

This is antithetical to any strong commitment to a community. In particular, it makes political citizenship, with its sense of duty and

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58 Paul Tillich, *The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society*, p. 22.

59 Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 4.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

allegiance to political society, more and more marginal, because the relationship between individuals is secondary to the self-realization of the partners.<sup>61</sup>

In his context, Xu Fuguan works within the difference autocracy/democracy, while Taylor discusses the contemporary contrast between fractured democracy/communitarian democracy, while underscoring the danger of fragmentation, the atomization of society, that makes difficult the realization of common political projects.<sup>62</sup>

Of course, Xu Fuguan did not foresee this effect of fragmentation of the democratic community as resulting from the prolific growth of self-awareness in industrial-technological society. Nor from the constant tension between moral ideals and the institutions of this society. His work focused on democratic politics. Now we clearly know that democracy and technology are intimately imbricated. Theoretically speaking, the moral Western tradition of Christian morality could have had the same beneficial effect on modern Western democracy as that of Chinese Confucian morality recommended by Xu Fuguan. When he proposes to correct the deficiencies of Western democratic politics through incorporating in it the “moral humanist spirit of Chinese culture,” he is unaware that, in fact, in the Western world, Christian morality, a cultural dimension much older than democracy, could have assumed this role if it had not been disconnected from socio-political life as Western society became more and more democratic and secularized. Also, Xu did not consider that Confucian morality, like Christian morality, had been rooted in a quasi-spiritual dimension since its renewal during Song times (the belief in the moral principle of coherence)<sup>63</sup> which had contributed to its potency and that it too could become less effective when transplanted in the democratic context of industrial-technical

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61 Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 43.

62 Ibid., p. 112.

63 See Diana Arghirescu, “Zhu Xi's Spirituality: A New Interpretation of The *Great Learning*.”

society. Christian morality remains embedded in what Tillich calls “the democratic way of life” in the ethical sense: “Democracy as a way of life that does justice to the dignity of every human being is the basic principle of political ethics.”<sup>64</sup> This profound aspect of democracy within which democratic politics is rooted is rather absent from Xu’s field of vision, because, in the context of his time, his top priority was laying a strong foundation for its political practice. At the time when Xu Fuguan considers correcting Western democracy with Confucian morality, within Chinese culture, Tillich, advocates for a new role of Christian morality in the Western world, as the basis for political ethics: “to support plans for social security and a higher standard of life, [...] not by technical or legal suggestions but primarily by the creation of a new community that can find expression in political forms.”<sup>65</sup>

The moral Christian tradition failed to provide an effective foundation for democracy, not only because of the secularization of society, a technology-driven process, but also, because of the inherent tension between the accomplishment of self-awareness out of a desire to achieve personal fulfillment and moral demands coming from beyond personal desires or aspirations,<sup>66</sup> whether from community (active engagement in the democratic process, fulfilling the duty to work towards the common good), from Confucian or Christian tradition, or from moral values coming from within (Confucianism’s human nature bestowed by heaven) and above (Christian morality’s God). The constant tension between moral demands (Confucian or Christian) and personal aspirations is a permanent struggle, entrenched in modern societies, which stems from the fusion between democracy and technology (this term includes here a market economy and bureaucratic regulatory authority). Democracy and technology cannot be separated. This is an argument that reveals the difficulty faced by Xu Fuguan’s project of introducing moral foundations to democratic and technologic society. Karl Polanyi (1886-

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64 Paul Tillich, *The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society*, p. 23.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

66 Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 58.

1964) another Western contemporary of Xu Fuguan, clearly expresses this difficulty, when urging to go beyond the “market society” (his specific perspective on democratic and technological society):

The market operates as an invisible line, which isolates each individual, as producer or consumer, in his everyday activity. Everyone produces for the market and buys supplies from the market. The individual cannot escape the market, whatever his wishes to be useful to his fellows. Any attempt to offer assistance is immediately frustrated by market mechanisms. [...] As long as you follow the market rules, by buying at the lowest price and reselling your merchandise at the highest price possible, you are relatively safe. The harm that you cause to your fellows to support your interests is therefore inevitable. Consequently, the more the individual puts aside the idea of being useful to others, the more effectively he reduces his share of responsibility for harming others. In such a system, it is impermissible for human beings to be kind, whatever their wish to be so.<sup>67</sup>

In Western terms, it can be said that the contemporary tension between self-awareness and moral consciousness embodies a confrontation between higher and lower forms of freedom. Taylor describes this kind of tension and the importance of continually navigating through its waves, in the following terms:

The nature of a free society is that it will always be the locus of struggle between higher and lower forms of freedom. Neither side can abolish the other, but the line can be moved, never definitively but at least for some people, for some time, one way or the other. Through

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67 Karl Polanyi, “Communauté et société. La critique chrétienne de notre ordre moral,” in *Essais de Karl Polanyi*, Françoise Laroche and Laurence Collaud (trans.) (Paris: Seuil, 2008), p. 459.

social action, political change, and winning hearts and minds, the better form can gain ground, at least for a while.<sup>68</sup>

One can consider the process described by Taylor as an effort to constantly rebalance the “instability” of democracy, to re-strengthen democracy every time it is weakened by the technological dimension. Xu believed that the stability of democracy was possible to achieve through the introduction of a Confucian moral ground, i.e., “the Confucian thought concerning the practice of virtues and rites (*rujia de yu li de sixiang* 儒家德與禮的思想).”<sup>69</sup> The evolution of the fusion democracy-technology in modern Western society has taught us that the very principle of the functioning of democracy is instability and constant adjustment, a never-ending tension between self-awareness and moral consciousness.

## 5.2 Achieving awareness of the moral force of reason

The first step of Xu’s project discussed earlier involves developing self-awareness while preserving Confucian moral consciousness as its grounding. Its second step entails grafting onto democratic politics what he calls “the moral force of reason (*lixing zhong de dexing zhi li* 理性中的德性之力).” Thus, Xu Fuguan’s project is founded on a particular meaning of the notion of “reason,” inspired by both Western reason and Confucian morality. Of course, in the Western context, reason is a major concept with multiple definitions and connotations, which both Tillich and Taylor discussed at length. I examine below the different understandings of the term “reason” in the Chinese and Western context, and its cultural presuppositions.

The term “reason (*lixing* 理性),” initially a Japanese translation of the Western notion of reason, subsequently adopted by modern Chinese culture from

68 Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 78.

69 Fu-guan Xu, *Xueshu yu Zhengzhi zhi jia*, p. 54.

the Japanese, is used by Xu Fuguan to describe a Western reality, but is grounded in Chinese presuppositions. This translation contains the traditional, Song dynasty Neo-Confucian notion of moral “principle of coherence” (*li* 理), bestowed by heaven to each individual person and every other kind of living being. The perception of reason as “the nature” (性 *xing*) of the principle of coherence *li* originates from the Song dynasty School of Principle (see, for instance, Zhu Xi's introduction to his commentary *Zhongyong Zhangju*).<sup>70</sup>

In the following paragraph, Xu Fuguan illustrates his notion of moral force of reason through raising an issue similar to Polanyi's argument mentioned above concerning the tension between morality and technology (capitalism, science, the market), but starting from a different cultural presupposition:

Nowadays, the process of connection between science and capitalism has generated a gigantic world centered on mechanisms and profits. The individual's primitive vital impulse (*yuanshi shengming de chongdong* 原始生命的衝動) is provoked and fuelled by this type of exterior world. It is thus amplified and its strength is enhanced. As a result, when facing this primitive impulse, the light of the individual's rationality (*zhixing zhi guang* 知性之光) appears dark and weak. In this situation, the moral force of reason is the only one able to transform and promote life (*jiang shengming jia yi zhuanhua* 將生命加以轉化), and make it possible to convert this impulse into a strong practice of morality. All human beings and the whole of society are pursuing this development of the sciences with the aim of fuelling their own growth. However, Western culture lacks awareness of this. That is why the primitive vital force of the individuals manifests itself through unruly behavior. Having broken the constraints of rationality (*tupo le zhixing* 突破了知性), it is thus seething in all directions as do those

70 Zhu Xi's introductory note in Diana Arghirescu, *De la continuité dynamique dans l'univers confucéen, Lecture néoconfucéenne du Zhongyong* 中庸, pp. 39-44.

evil spirits from the novel *Shuihu Zhuan* [Water margin]. [...] The antirationalist (*fan heli zhuyi de* 反合理主義的) approach of Western thinking, and the false sciences like logical positivism, psychoanalysis, and psychologism were born of this source.<sup>71</sup>

Xu Fuguan understands reason and rationality in a single and fundamentally positive way, as a coordinator of the practice of morality and of orderly behavior. The Chinese term for rationality contains the classical notion of *li* 理.<sup>72</sup> translation shows, the cultural presupposition embedded in Xu's notion of "moral force of reason" is the presence in each being of a moral principle of coherence *li*. This implies the absence of separation between the inner life and outside world of individuals at a subtle level, because of the participation of every coherence principle within the common moral principle of coherence of heaven (*tianli* 天理).<sup>73</sup> The moral principle of coherence is believed to be embodied in one's authentic nature (*xing* 性) and, through training, it can master one's emotions (*qing* 情) and make their expression orderly.<sup>74</sup> This belief calls for a Confucian interpretation of reason as motivation to understand and follow the moral principles of things, which, at a deeper level, turn out to be individuated expressions of one common principle of heaven, and therefore unique adaptations of it to the distinctive reality of each individual being. According to Xu, this moral force of reason is also a stimulation to follow the middle way

71 Fu-guan Xu, *Xu Fuguan Wencu*, p. 265.

72 I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for highlighting that the term "rationalism" that Xu Fuguan adopts in this context is most likely the Japanese term *heli zhuyi* 合理主義 (ごうりしゅぎ), which corresponds to the contemporary Chinese term *lixing zhuyi* 理性主義. However, it may also be seen that both Chinese and Japanese terms for "reason" rely on the classical Neo-Confucian notion of *li* 理. Even if Xu Fuguan uses a Japanese translation, the presence of the classical notion of *li* 理 within both Japanese and Chinese translations of the term "reason, rationality" justifies the relevance of the following hermeneutics built around Xu Fuguan's cross-cultural understanding of the Western meaning of "reason."

73 Diana Arghirescu, "The Neo-Confucian Transmoral Dimension of Zhu Xi's Moral Thought," *Philosophy East and West*, 69, 1 (Jan., 2009).

74 See a commentary on this training process in Zhu Xi's *Zhongyong Zhangju*, Diana Arghirescu, *De la continuité dynamique dans l'univers confucéen, Lecture néoconfucéenne du Zhongyong* 中庸, pp. 86-88.

(*zhongyong zhi dao* 中庸之道) rooted in human nature.<sup>75</sup> By making this claim, he expresses the valorization of the “reasonable (*heli de* 合理的)” character of inner emotions and external behavior, in other words, the agreement or harmony between an individual’s inside and outside. The idea of “moral force of reason” illustrates Xu’s intention to correct the inner damage caused by science and capitalism, using Confucian morality:

The Chinese Confucians attach importance to rites and music. Thus, they intend to guide in a reasonable manner (*heli de shudao* 合理的疏導) the inner original emotion of the human being (*yuanshi qinggan* 原始情感), and bring it conveniently out in a reasonable manner (*heli de fashu chulai* 合理的發舒出來). This is what is called ‘following one’s emotions, and adjusting them through the rites.’ It is in this way that a human being’s temperament and emotions are in tune with each other, and the inward accommodates the outward (*ren de xing yu qing yizhi nei yu wai yizhi* 人的性與情一致內與外一致) so that there is no longer any dark and erratic breathing, which hides in the heart’s depths. The individual can thus lead an innocent, joyful, brotherly and serene life.<sup>76</sup>

As mentioned above, this perception of reason as “the nature of principle *lixing*” stems from the presupposition of the principle of coherence as a moral force that maintains the harmony and solidarity between one’s internal and external world. Xu Fuguan is a strong voice of this tradition for which reason is a catalyzer of the middle way, understood as a conciliation process or “reasonable (*heli* 合理)” (word-for-word translation: converging towards the common principle of coherence *li*) accommodation between competing views. Thus, he connects this Chinese Confucian ideal of the middle way with the concrete situation of modern democratic-technical society.

75 Fuguan Xu, *Zhongguo Sixiangshi Lunji Xubian*, p. 573.

76 Fu-guan Xu, *Xueshu yu Zhengzhi zhi jia*, pp. 270-271.

When saying that Western culture lacks awareness of the moral force of reason with the result that the primitive vital force of individuals manifests itself through unruly behavior, and condemning what he sees as “antirationalism (*fan heli zhuyi* 反合理主義)” (word-for-word translation of the Japanese term that Xu Fuguan is using here: diverging from a common principle of coherence *li*), Xu Fuguan is obviously unaware of the multidimensionality of the Western term “reason,” and of the Western cultural presupposition supporting this multidimensionality. The notion of reason experienced a gradual transformation, according to the stages of bourgeois society. The above-mentioned traditional humanistic reason embodied in the principle of automatic harmony has lately turned into a technical or instrumental reason corresponding to the previously discussed principle of self-fulfillment. Charles Taylor defines instrumental reason as “the kind of rationality we draw on when we calculate the most economic application of means to a given end. Maximum efficiency, the best cost-output ration, is its measure of success.”<sup>77</sup>

As Xu Fuguan’s reason as the middle way is a traditional Chinese interpretation of reason, based on the presupposition of the coherence principle, it is relevant to compare it with the Western traditional vision of reason, i.e., humanistic reason. The latter, as Tillich explains it, “did not mean the process of reasoning, but the power of truth and justice embodied in man as man.”<sup>78</sup> This is radically different from Xu Fuguan’s conception of reason as the middle way, as the “reasonable” path of conciliatory agreement, because Western humanistic reason, i.e., reason as justice, is oriented towards the achievement and defence of rights. In the Western perspective, Taylor reminds us, the decisions concerning rights are usually winner-take-all, “either you win or you lose.”<sup>79</sup> In the same passage, he further elaborates, “the very concept of a right seems to call for integral satisfaction, if it’s a right at all; and if not, then nothing.” The foundation

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77 Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 5.

78 Paul Tillich, *The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society*, p. 4.

79 Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 116.

of this Western reason as justice is adversarial, it relies on instability, its nature is essentially different from the “stable” Confucian reason.

Ultimately, let us examine Xu Fuguan's above-quoted pinpointing of the “antirationalist” character of Western thinking. He criticizes what he describes as a “primitive impulse,” without really being aware of its functioning and valorization within the Western context. As previously discussed, in democratic and technological society, traditional humanistic reason and rationality have been replaced by technical, utilitarian or instrumental reason that controls the individual by subjecting him to the imperatives of self-fulfillment. Xu Fuguan has no experience with this technical reason, and obviously cannot see that what he perceives as the individual's primitive vital impulse, “irrational” according to Chinese cultural presumptions, is in Western culture not a dark and erratic breathing of the individual's depths, but an expression of the separation between inward and outward worlds that enables the individual to revolt against his control by utilitarian reason. Xu Fuguan obviously didn't perceive that Western culture valorizes such an impulse as an effective expression of an individual's struggle to overcome the control exerted by this technological reason—a struggle powerful enough to overcome individual loneliness and community fragmentation—or as an effort to recuperate the unity of the individual and of the community through recognizing the existence of an authentic depth inside humans, inaccessible to technological reason.

## 6. Conclusion

Using Gadamer's theory of interpretive understanding, the present essay brings to light the existence of two interwoven dimensions within Xu Fuguan's project: his efforts to revive the “initial democratic spirit of Chinese culture” and to connect Confucianism and democracy. It also examines the key aspects of each. Both facets require a cross-cultural sensibility, and I explore in particular

this intercultural aspect of Xu Fuguan's work by identifying Western and Chinese presuppositions embedded in both, thus initiating a cross-cultural dialogue between those cultural assumptions. This allows me to illustrate how he threw a bridge between the Chinese and the Western spirits through building a reconstructive understanding of the notion of democracy from within Chinese culture, as well as through redefining the contemporary Confucians' relation to their tradition.

It might be said that, in the actual global and East Asian contexts, Xu Fuguan's project concerning a new future path for contemporary China, both democratic and Confucian, is more relevant than ever. Recent American research<sup>80</sup> on the state of democracy highlights two important new findings. First, democracy remains the goal that countries are seeking, because it is still perceived as the best system for achieving prosperity and effective governance.<sup>81</sup> This finding confirms Xu Fuguan's intuition that establishing a democratic system is instrumental in building the future Chinese modern state and modern society.

The second, less optimistic, is that democracy has been in a global recession for the most of the last decade.<sup>82</sup> The American research applies globally a single reference, a culturally limited notion of democracy, i.e., the Western one, and classifies regimes as democracies or not on continuous measurement of Western key variables, such as political rights and civil liberties.<sup>83</sup> The latter represent indeed the focus of Western democracy, i.e., rights and liberties. From this

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80 I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for suggesting that I consider the relevance of Xu Fuguan's theory within this recent research on the standing of democracy in the world. The latter finds that "the world has been in a mild but protracted democratic recession since about 2006." See Larry Diamond, "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession," in Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner and Condoleezza Rice (eds.), *Democracy In Decline?* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2015), p. 102.

81 Marc F. Plattner, "Introduction," in *Democracy In Decline?*, p. 7.

82 Larry Diamond, "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession," p. 114.

83 *Ibid.*, p. 101.

observation, two comments directly related to Xu Fuguan's project can be inferred.

First, it is fair to say that these culturally indifferent studies measure and acknowledge not the decline of "global democracy" in general, but the decline of a special form of democracy, i.e., the "Western democracy" menaced by individualism or civic apathy, as Tocqueville (1805-1859), Xu Fuguan and Charles Taylor observed (see section 5.1). This conclusion also confirms Xu Fuguan's interpretation of the Western culture. His arguments related to the decline of the Western democracy are discussed earlier in this study.

Second, for a more accurate appreciation of the growth of democracies, the latter should be characterized as culturally grounded. Xu Fuguan's project also suggested this. His study on democracy and Confucianism conveys that it is necessary to improve these recent studies on the standing of democracy in the world by adding a new cultural dimension to them, developing key variables that are culturally appropriate and are able to more accurately define and analyse the particular regional aspects of global democracy (Western, East Asian, African, etc.). Xu Fuguan's study, rooted in Confucianism, suggests that "responsibilities and duties" of cultural and political elites could be such a key variable adapted to Confucian democracy.

Finally, as shown below, several important findings of those recent studies (Diamond, Fukuyama, etc.) confirm one idea put forward by Xu Fuguan, Charles Taylor and Paul Tillich: the importance of improving "human quality" seen as individuals' moral quality and moral integrity, through moral education. According to Fukuyama, the legitimacy of many democracies around the world depends less on the deepening of their democratic institutions than on their ability to provide high-quality governance, i.e., better-quality democracy as the solution to the problem of corruption and weak state capacity.<sup>84</sup> Diamond labels

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84 Francis Fukuyama, "Why is Democracy Performing so Poorly?," in *Democracy In Decline?*, pp. 16-18.

the latter “bad governance” that directly relates to the deterioration of the rule of law (abuse of power) and transparency (including corruption). He acknowledges that “leaders who think that they can get away with it are eroding democratic checks and balances, hollowing out institutions of accountability, overriding term limits and normative restraints, and accumulating power and wealth for themselves and their families, cronies, clients, and parties.”<sup>85</sup> In the West including the United States, Diamond also identifies additional signs of “democratic ill health”: a political system that appears increasingly polarized and deadlocked, ever-mounting cost of election campaigns, the surging role of nontransparent money in politics, low rates of voter participation.”<sup>86</sup> It is easy to see that, at the end of the day, all above-mentioned significant failures of actual democracies are directly related to the moral quality of the leaders and of the voters. This can be improved through moral education (i.e., Confucian, Christian, or other) as Xu Fuguan stressed in his works. Therefore, these new research findings confirm that the two components of the good governance according to the classic *Daxue*, i.e., care and impartiality, and Xu Fuguan’s urging leaders to abandon subjective opinions and personal preferences (see section 4.2), are more relevant than ever. Furthermore, all these political studies confirm Xu Fuguan’s idea that outstanding moral and cultural leaders constitute the heart of the democracy, and that the true foundation of the democratic growth can be none other than the moral education of political leaders, voters and members of communities.♦

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85 Larry Diamond, “Facing Up to the Democratic Recession,” pp. 108-109.

86 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

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