CHAPTER 5

Wang Yangming’s Philosophy and Modern Theories of Democracy

A Reconstructive Interpretation

This chapter examines another central Neo-Confucian philosopher, who intently studied Zhu Xi’s writings and later became one of his most serious critics. Wang Yangming challenged many aspects of Zhu Xi’s interpretations, and the nature of his criticism has contributed much to the modern discussion over the relationship between Confucianism and democracy among Taiwanese liberals and the New Confucians. Wang Yangming’s brand of Neo-Confucianism plays a key role in modern Chinese philosophy, considerations of the compatibility of the theories of democracy, and the general Confucian project.

“Original Knowing”: Liu Shipei’s Reconstructive Interpretation of Wang Yangming’s Theory

Since the end of the Qing dynasty, the relationship between Confucianism and democracy has been a great concern of Chinese intellectuals. Even today, after a century of discussion, this problem is still being raised in connection with the debate over “Asian values.” In previous scholarship, a number of scholars claimed that the Confucian tradition encompasses the concept of democracy. This topic, however, has not received much contemporary scholarly attention. Recent discussions focus on the following questions: Is the Confucian tradition compatible with the requirements of modern democracy? If so, can we find intellectual resources in Confucian tradition that will facilitate the implementation of modern democracy?
One topic that has received attention in connection with this ongoing discussion is the relevance of Wang Yangming’s learning to the implementation of democracy. The 1904 book *The Essential Meaning of the Chinese Social Contract* (*Zhongguo minyue jingyi* 中國民約精義) was the earliest Chinese publication on the relationship between Wang Yangming’s thought and democracy. Written by Liu Shipei 劉師培 (Shenshu 申叔, 1884–1919), who relied on Yang Tingdong’s 楊廷棟 (1878–1950) translation of Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, the book compares some of Rousseau’s ideas with those of the Confucian tradition, claiming that the Confucian tradition already embodies the same democratic concepts. At that time, Rousseau’s book was accepted by Chinese intellectuals as one of the standard works for the theory of democracy. In his preface to *The Essential Meaning of the Chinese Social Contract*, Liu wrote that “in obtaining this [Rousseau’s *Social Contract*], our country has merely acquired a new scholarly locution and nothing more. And yet certain reactionary individuals regard it as a heterodox doctrine, as if the sages and worthies of our country had never advocated such an idea.” Liu continued: “Searching through our country’s works, I have obtained several texts that contain the former sages’ ideas about social contracts. I have appended my commentaries to these texts, corroborated them according to Rousseau’s theory, and reflected upon their strengths and weaknesses.”

The range of Liu Shipei’s compilation extends from the *Book of Changes* to the works of the Qing scholar Dai Wang 戴望 (1837–1873). In the section of the text devoted to Wang Yangming, he included the following three passages:

1. The man of humaneness [*ren* 仁] takes heaven, earth, and the myriad things as one body; there is nothing that is not the self. Thus [Confucius] said: “[The man of humaneness] in wishing to establish himself, seeks also to establish others; in wishing to be accomplished, he seeks also to accomplish others” (Letter to Wang Jiaxiu 王嘉秀 Requesting Instruction).

2. The mind of judging right and wrong knows without deliberation and is capable without study; this is the meaning of the “original knowing” [*liangzhi* 良知]. The original knowing is in the human mind; it does not vary between the wise and the foolish, and throughout the world it remains the same today as it was in the past. The cultivated individuals of our times should devote themselves to extending their original knowing. Then they of themselves naturally will be able to impartially judge right and wrong, unite likes and dislikes, view others as themselves, view the country as their families, and take heaven, earth, and the myriad things as one body. When
this is accomplished, it would be impossible for the world to be in a state of disorder (Letter in Response to Nie Wenwei 聶文蔚).\textsuperscript{5}

3. Only [those who] illuminate their bright virtue in order to love the people can take one body as the world; only those who love the people in order to illuminate their bright virtue are able to take the world as one body (Script written for Zhao Limeng 趙立孟).\textsuperscript{6}

After quoting the above three passages, Liu added the following commentary:

[Wang Yangming’s] theory of the original knowing derives from Mencius’ thesis that human nature is originally good. Wang Yangming spoke of the original knowing, whereas Rousseau spoke of the goodness of human nature. \textit{The Social Contract} states: “People’s predilection toward goodness derives from their innate nature. It is so even if they have yet to enter into the social contract”\textsuperscript{7} (book 2, chapter 6). These words firmly grasp the purport of Mencius’ [thesis about] the goodness of human nature, from which [Wang Yangming’s] theory of the original knowing derives. The original knowing is that which originates only in heaven. Since people’s original knowing is the same, what they obtain from heaven is also the same. Since what they obtain from heaven is the same, as demonstrated by the statement that “Yao 堯 and Shun 舜 are the same as ordinary people” \textsuperscript{4B.32} \textit{Mencius}, how is it possible to establish a division according to different grades? \textit{The Social Contract} also states: “Everyone is born to have the right or capacity to liberty as the master of his body. He manages his right or capacity to liberty with a view to control the affairs of the world, making them conform to his own will and not allowing it to bow even slightly to others. This is what rationality affirms” \textsuperscript{8} (book 4, chapter 2). Indeed, although there exist natural distinctions at birth between the strong and the weak, the intelligent and the ignorant, once the social contract is established, in the eyes of the law, such distinctions no longer exist. [These words] are similar to those expressed by Wang Yangming. \{Yangming said: “Only the most refined sages in the world are able to be intelligent and wise. Formerly, [the sage’s ability] was looked at as being very miraculous, but now [we] see it as something that all people originally had.” He also said: “Only those who illuminate their bright virtue in order to love the people are able to take one body as the world.” He likewise said: “The bright virtue refers to the heavenly endowed nature, which is miraculously radiant and not darkened; it is the place from which the myriad principles originate.” This is exactly the purport of both the statement in \textit{Doctrine of the Mean}: “What heaven imparts to man is the nature” and Mencius’ [thesis about] the goodness of human nature. Now
Wang Yangming regarded goodness as coming from the original nature, and thus he wanted all people truly to attain impartiality in their will. In this, his ideas were similar to the Song Confucian Lu Jiuyuan 魯九淵.\}

Liu continued:

Moreover, Rousseau regarded renouncing the right or capacity to liberty to be equivalent to renouncing what makes one human. Thus preserving the right or capacity to liberty is one of the most important responsibilities of our life. [Book 1, chapter 4, of the Social Contract states: “Those who discard the right or capacity to liberty discard their bright virtue bestowed by heaven and [maintain that] it comes from the outside. This is the meaning of self-abnegation.”] This [statement] also takes liberty to be innately endowed at birth. Now, the right or capacity to liberty is endowed by heaven, just as the original knowing is endowed by heaven. Liberty has nothing on which it depends, just as the original knowing has nothing on which it depends. Thus it is permissible to say that the original knowing is just the right or capacity to liberty. Although Wang Yangming did not elaborate upon the principles of civil rights in his writings, the essential principles of equality and liberty can be inferred from his theory of the original knowing. Today, if we intend to shake up Chinese scholarly trends, need we only elaborate upon the theory of the original knowing?\8

In the above commentary, Liu Shipei included three different passages from The Social Contract. By contemporary standards, Yang Tingdong’s Chinese translation suffers from a lack of precision, and his sometimes mechanical use of traditional Chinese terminology reveals a tendency toward overinterpretation. For example, Liu Shipei’s quotation from book 2, chapter 6, reads that “people’s predilection toward goodness derives from their innate nature. It is so even if they have yet to enter into the social contract.” This deviates widely from the original text that reads: “That which is good and conformable to order is such by the nature of things, independent of human conventions.”\9 Since this passage does not directly address human nature, Liu Shipei’s use of it to prove that Rousseau advanced a thesis about the goodness of human nature is problematic. Yet, in some of his other works, in particular, Émile and Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Rousseau clearly confirmed the goodness of human nature. Therefore, even if the texts Liu Shipei quoted from have problems, his conclusions can still be regarded as fundamentally correct.

If we leave aside the particulars of these passages and look at Liu Shipei’s comments on the thought of Wang Yangming as a whole, we can discern Liu’s two key points: First, Wang Yangming’s theory of the original knowing encom-
passes the essentials of liberty, equality, and civil rights; and, second, the mean-
ing of the phrases “taking heaven, earth, and the myriad things as one body” and “taking the world as one body” in Wang Yangming’s theory of the original
knowing is especially consonant with the principles of civil rights.

Debate between Taiwanese Liberals and the New Confucians:
The Relationship between Confucianism and Democracy

Although the above two points are relatively simple, they were often repeated
and critiqued in the ensuing debate over the relevance of Confucianism to
democracy. The significance of Liu’s conclusions for this debate can be seen in
the papers presented at the “Conference on the Thought of Wang Yangming”
hosted by the Center for Humanities Research at Taiwan Normal University
in 1988. At the conference, three papers discussed the relationship between
Wang Yangming’s philosophy and modern democracy: Wang Bangxiong’s 王
邦雄 “On the Theoretical Foundations of Democracy and Rule of Law from
the Perspective of Zhu Xi’s and Wang Yangming’s Views on the Mind and the
Nature,” Zeng Chunhai’s 曾春海 “Possible Problems in the Practical Implemen-
tation of Wang Yangming’s ‘Extending the Original Knowing’ in Democratic
Order,” and Chen Yufu’s 陳郁夫 “On the Possibility of Using ‘Extending the
Original Knowing’ as the Philosophical Foundation for Democracy.” In their
papers, both Wang and Chen affirmed the relationship between democracy and
Wang Yangming’s thought. What is noteworthy is that the basic points of their
arguments do not go beyond those advanced by Liu Shipei.

In opposition to their views, Zeng Chunhai discussed four potential prob-
lems in the practical implementation of Wang Yangming’s “extending the origi-
nal knowing” in a democratic order:

1. Wang Yangming’s theory of the original knowing affirms a high level
   of spiritual value. It transcends the pursuit and allocation of common
   value, resulting in the absence of the capability to develop individualism
   and a consciousness of rights, both of which are essential elements of
democracy.
2. The everyday norms of democracy must be established on the concep-
tualization of objective knowledge. The original knowing is not able to
provide this because the knowledge acquired by the original knowing is a
kind of “moral knowledge.”
3. The standards of democracy are institutional, experiential, external,
   objective, and require dealing with the structure, the operation, and the
   relationships of power. However, the standards of the original knowing are
a priori, internal, and subjective. They merely involve the moral impli-
cations that political activities may have and do not directly consider the problems surrounding institutions and power.

4. Wang Yangming’s theory of the original knowing takes the pursuit of a perfectly moral personality as its end. However, the demands made by democracy on its leaders are not moral ones.

Just as the papers presented by Chen and Wang, Zeng’s arguments do not break any new ground, because ideas similar to Zeng’s were already being advanced by Taiwanese liberals in the 1950s in their debate with the New Confucians over the relationship between Confucianism and democracy.

In this debate, the main representatives of liberalism are Yin Haiguang (1919–1969) and Zhang Foquan (1908–1994), whereas the main representatives of New Confucianism are Xu Fuguan, Mou Zongsan, Tang Junyi, and Zhang Junmai. In their joint declaration “Manifesto Regarding Chinese Culture to People All over the World” dating from 1958, the New Confucians acknowledged that the “practical moral subject” in Confucian ethics (or the learning of the mind and nature) was not directly equivalent to the “political subject” sought by democracy. This acknowledgment demonstrates that they in no way dismissed the distance and even inconsistency between Confucian ethics—which includes Wang Yangming’s theory of the original knowing—and democracy. On this point, there is no obvious difference between the position of the New Confucians and that of the liberals. What causes the sides to part company are their attitudes toward the Confucian tradition. From the liberals’ point of view, the Confucian tradition not only failed to develop democratic institutions, but it also worked to obstruct the emergence of the idea of democracy throughout Chinese history. For this reason, if the Chinese people intend to establish a democratic order, the liberals argue, they have to model it on the West.

From the perspective of the New Confucians, however, the fact that Chinese culture, which throughout history had been dominated by the Confucian tradition, failed to establish democratic institutions did not prove that the essence of the Confucian tradition is incompatible with democracy. In their opinion, the establishment of democratic institutions is an aim internal to Confucianism; it is a cultural ideal that is pursued in the process of the spiritual development of Confucianism. In their attempts to demonstrate this, they responded to the challenge posed by the liberal scholars from two different angles. First, on the basis of his extensive research on the history of Chinese thought, especially in his book Intellectual History of the Han (Liang Han sixiang shi), Xu Fuguan demonstrated that the fundamental Confucian spirit was corrupted to a substantial degree by the establishment of the imperial monarchy after the Qin and Han. Thus, he argued, it is not
“true” that Confucianism adapted successfully in the historical development of the imperial monarchy. Second, Mou Zongsan formulated his doctrine of “the self-negation of the original knowing” to explain the internal connection between Confucianism and democracy.

Mou Zongsan first advanced the above notion in his book titled Wang Yangming’s Teaching of Extending the Original Knowing (Wang Yangming zhi liangzhi jiao 王陽明致良知教). He originally wrote the book to explain the relationship between original knowing and knowledge. Later, in his books Philosophy of History (Lishi zhexue 歷史哲學) and The Principle of Legitimation and the Principle of Governance (Zhengdao yu zhidao 政道與治道), he again invoked this theory to explain the relationship of moral knowledge to science and democracy. In these works he divided the expressions of reason into two types: “functional expression” and “structural expression,” or “intentional expression” and “extensional expression.” Simply put, the functional expression of reason is for Mou a type of intellectual intuition, where the relationship between the subject and the object is expressed as one of subordination. The structural expression of reason then is a conceptual form of thought, where the relationship between subject and object is expressed as one of coordination.

Mou Zongsan identified the moral knowledge emphasized by traditional Confucians as the functional expression of reason. He further contended that the knowledge of democratic systems and science belong to the structural expression of reason. He defined the functional expression of reason as the direct expression of the moral subject and argued that, at the moment of its transformation into structural expression, the moral subject necessarily undergoes a dialectical turning of self-negation. This theory amounted to a modern transformation of the conceptual framework of traditional Confucianism—“inner sagehood, outer kingliness”—where the direct connection between “inner sagehood” and “outer kingliness” was transformed into an indirect one.

Mou Zongsan used this theory as a clever response to the doubts raised by the liberal scholars concerning the relevance of Confucianism to democracy. On one hand, he admitted that moral knowledge and democracy are essentially different, thereby providing a reason for the failure of the Confucian tradition to develop democratic institutions in the past; on the other hand, he affirmed the internal connection between moral knowledge and democracy, and provided a philosophical explanation for correlation of the two. As a result the main point of dispute between the liberal scholars and the New Confucians shifted from the former to the latter, because the liberal scholars opposed taking moral knowledge as the foundation for democracy.

The main reason Taiwanese liberal scholars opposed making moral knowledge the foundation for democracy is that they were influenced by the English and American liberal tradition. Passages from both Yin Haiguang and Zhang
Foquan demonstrate this point. In his essay “Keystone of Democracy,” Yin Hai-guang wrote:

If you take morality as the foundation for democracy, then this is consonant with Hegel’s panlogicism. Panlogicism is one of the theoretical foundations of panpoliticism, and panpoliticism serves as the framework for totalitarian government. Under the influence and even the domination of modern technology, the process is more important than the objective. This is because what people personally have contact with is the actual process but never the ideal objective. It has been like this since antiquity, and it has become more intense in the present. If the process of implementing the objective of morality is not done morally, then the ideal morality has the potential to create actual harm. The religious persecutions of the past, the tragedy engendered by the way of thinking of the “Record of Realization and Confusion Regarding Great Righteousness” (Dayi jue mi lu 大義覺迷錄) in the East, and the formation of modern totalitarian government are all rooted in this. Morality itself actually does not have the capability of preventing immoral behavior from appearing. Therefore, morality is not even remotely able to serve as the foundation for democracy. Taking a step back, even if we say that there are no such harms, morality after all belongs to the ethical realm. It is external to institutions, and, because of this, morality and political institutions are still two different entities.15

Likewise, Zhang Foquan, in his book Liberty and Human Rights (Ziyu yu renquan 自由與人權), wrote:

“Formal” and “negative” liberty serves as the point of distinction between democracy and totalitarianism. In the world today, the theory of positive liberty can be called the fashionable theory of the moment. It is a slogan of the totalitarian world; it is also a slogan of the socialists. These people harbor doubts about “negative liberty,” or the principle of removing “obstacles,” [saying that] it just treats the head when you have a headache or treats the feet when they hurt [i.e., it treats the symptoms and not the disease]. [They say that] what we are in urgent need of today is a complete plan and a thorough method. Let me indicate that the above words can only be spoken after one has been hypnotized by totalitarianism. When people speak such words, the complete plan in their minds is to have a “superman” design the lives and thoughts of the masses. The thorough method they envision in their minds involves opening up all barriers and letting the great dictator unrestrainedly trample [the lives and
rights of the masses. In fact, these advocates of positive liberty are not actually criticizing the inability to implement existing means of liberty or the fact that existing components of liberty are currently awaiting modification. The material liberty they advocate, rather, involves only those rights that have been determined by the rulers. Over the past decades the bitter taste of this type of material liberty is something that people have actually experienced under totalitarian institutions.16

Zhang completed this book in May of 1953, before Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997) advanced the distinction between positive liberty and negative liberty.17 In addition to following the English and American liberal traditions, Berlin’s use of the concept of negative liberty to combat positive liberty was also formulated against the historical background of the Cold War. From the time Jacob Leib Talmon (1916–1980) put forward the distinction between “totalitarian democracy” and “liberal democracy,” the majority of Anglo-American political scientists and intellectual historians recognized that the modern West had two traditions of democracy.18 The first began with J.-J. Rousseau and was continued through the advocacy of French intellectuals and led to the French Revolution. Later, this tradition was picked up by the German idealists, especially Hegel, and, after being reinterpreted by Marx and Engels, the tradition led to the communist revolutions. The second tradition began with John Locke and was continued through the advocacy of English liberal thinkers and America’s founding fathers. It served as the foundation for the constitutional democracies of both Great Britain and the United States.

F. A. von Hayek (1899–1992) called these two traditions the “French tradition” and the “British tradition,”19 but it is actually more appropriate to call them the “European continental tradition” and the “Anglo-American tradition.” One of the points of divergence between these two traditions is precisely their different views of “positive liberty” and “negative liberty.” As the two passages quoted above demonstrate, the problem of “negative liberty” and “positive liberty” also entered into the debate between the scholars of liberalism and the New Confucians.

Simply put, the concept of “negative liberty” emphasizes the scope of action that remains exempt from external obstacles and constraints, whereas “positive liberty” refers to the freedom of self-realization that is not dependent on any external condition. As a result the advocates of the former stress external freedom, whereas the proponents of the latter tend to be more concerned with spiritual and moral freedom. The main reason liberals advocate negative liberty and oppose positive liberty is that negative liberty only involves itself with the scope of external behavior and preserves a neutral position with regard to value choices. The implications of negative liberty are clear, making it possible to cre-
are lists of “basic freedoms” or “bills of rights” that are not easily susceptible to distortion. In opposition to this, positive liberty concerns itself with the contents of values, resulting in its engagement with metaphysical problems. This concern with metaphysics provides totalitarian regimes with an opportunity to invoke ideology as a pretext for interfering with people’s external freedom, as commonly seen in communist countries.

However, it is important to note that, although Taiwanese liberal scholars resembled their Western counterparts in using negative liberty to oppose positive liberty, the New Confucians not only did not reject negative liberty, they recognized that it is absent from the Chinese cultural tradition and that it is something that should be adopted. What the New Confucians disagreed with is the liberal scholars’ use of arguments based on logic and practical results to contrast positive liberty with negative liberty, employing the latter to reject the former. From the viewpoint of the New Confucians, negative liberty logically presupposes positive liberty; otherwise it has no means of being established.20 Moreover, in terms of practical results, the New Confucians believed that the moral implications inherent in positive liberty could serve as an effective instrument for dealing with totalitarianism. No wonder Xu Fuguan indicated that he “was not willing to be merely a liberalist.”21

Reappraising Wang Yangming’s Theory of “Original Knowing” from the Communitarian Perspective

From the 1980s there emerged in the American intellectual community the trend of “communitarianism,” whose main representatives were Alasdair MacIntyre (1929–), Michael Sandel (1953–), and Charles Taylor (1931–). This intellectual trend arose as a critical response to John Rawls’ (1921–2002) seminal work *A Theory of Justice* and later developed into a critical examination of the basic presuppositions of liberalism. The communitarian critique of liberalism involves a number of points, which cannot be examined in detail here. For the present purpose, the problem of positive liberty and negative liberty, and concerns for the relationship between the individual and the community will be addressed.

In his essay “What’s Wrong with Negative Liberty?” Charles Taylor provided a critical examination of the theory of negative liberty.22 In Taylor’s opinion, limiting negative liberty to “the exemption from external obstacles” makes it impossible for it to encompass one of the core objectives of liberalism—the self-realization of an individual. Taylor contended that, once we adopt the standpoint of self-realization, we are unable to avoid distinguishing between true and false or between important and unimportant in all of our motives (or ends). In other words, the adoption of this standpoint requires us to recognize
that value choices are not purely subjective. This in turn compels us to adopt the concept of “positive liberty” and further to define it as “the ability to realize one’s ends.”

From the liberal perspective, once we acknowledge that motives (or ends) possess distinctions between true and false, and between important and unimportant, this will inevitably lead to the recognition that value choices have objective standards. Such objective standards can provide a country or society with the opportunity to use the pursuit of true ends as a pretext for interfering with people’s actions, giving rise to the collective suppression of the individual. Because of this, liberalism needs to preserve the “Maginot Line” of negative liberty to protect against the possibility of the collective suppressing the individual. But, according to Taylor, this line is impossible to hold, and, moreover, recognizing objective standards in value choices does not inevitably lead to totalitarianism. In other words, Taylor believed that there is no necessary logical connection between positive liberty and totalitarianism.

Moreover, when liberals insist on the position of negative liberty, they actually presuppose a type of individualist viewpoint, looking upon the individual as an independent subject with no relation to the community. This is precisely what Sandel called the “unencumbered self.” According to communitarians, an individual’s choices about ends and values are formed within society. For this reason society is not merely an instrumental existence, but rather has an indivisible internal connection with the formation of an individual’s self. Taylor elucidates this position in this way: “One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it.”

Not all of the disputes between the communitarians and the liberals are diametrically opposed, nor are all of the criticisms that the communitarians directed against the liberals evenhanded. It seems that the liberals’ affirmation of the basic rights and values of humanity is beyond doubt, and in this respect the communitarians’ rebukes cannot avoid a sense of impropriety. Thus, rather than viewing communitarianism and liberalism as two mutually opposed positions, perhaps it is better to regard communitarianism as a supplement to and revision of liberalism. However, communitarianism’s critique of liberalism definitely exposes several theoretical dimensions that the latter overlooks, as the two points discussed above show.

If we use these two dimensions as a template for interpreting the language used by Liu Shipei at the beginning of this chapter, it is not difficult to discern some points of agreement between Wang Yangming’s philosophy and Western communitarianism. Liu Shipei stated that Wang Yangming’s theory of original knowing could serve as the foundation for civil rights. This is simply an acknowledgment that positive liberty can serve as the foundation for negative liberty, since original knowing pertains to the realm of positive liberty. More-
over, Wang Yangming emphasized that “heaven, earth, and the myriad things are one body,” “regarding one body as the world” and “regarding the world as one body.” The meaning of these statements is that the original knowing necessarily connects with other people and society at large when it issues forth.

However, individuals, according to Wang Yangming, can rely on their original knowing to uphold their autonomy in making moral judgments and decisions. For this reason, it is not difficult to discern an intense spirit of liberty in the thought of both Wang Yangming and his later followers, especially the Taizhou 泰州 school. However, this spirit of liberty is not established on a concept of the self completely divorced from the community, or “the unencumbered self,” if put in Sandel’s words. Quite the opposite, in Wang Yangming’s view, an individual’s moral autonomy and the universal connectivity of the original knowing represent two sides of the same coin. Thus, following Wang Yangming with regard to the problem of the relationship between the individual and community, it has been argued, traditional Confucians would neither adopt the modern Western viewpoint of “individualism” nor discard individual autonomy and follow collective values as maintained by the recent advocates of “Asian values.”

Xu Fuguan, in his highly influential article explaining liberalism, “Why Oppose Liberalism?” wrote the following:

When liberalists were emancipated from tradition and society, they did not fundamentally deny tradition and society, but made a new evaluation of tradition and society in which they clarified and refined the given ideas and events and moreover imbued them with new content. In this way, they created a more reasonable and enriched tradition and society. Liberalists still had to live within the mainstream of tradition and society. However, they would not live passively or negatively. Rather they were active and positive in their unrelenting efforts to create and improve tradition and society. They caused both to no longer be a blind impulse but instead, illumined under humankind’s conscience and reason, to gradually become the product of humankind’s conscience and reason. For this reason, liberalism not only actualized individuals from the emancipation of their own spirit, it also actualized the community at the moment it actualized individuals.

Xu Fuguan wrote this essay in 1956, at a time when communitarianism had not yet become part of the Western intellectual landscape. From the above passage it is not difficult to see that Xu’s explanation of liberalism or his revision of it is consonant with the viewpoint of Western communitarianism.

In sum, the appearance of communitarianism in the West has provided us
with an advantageous position from which to once again evaluate the relationship between Confucian tradition (including Wang Yangming’s thought) and democracy, and to revise the one-dimensional viewpoint of Taiwanese liberalism on this issue. With this intent in mind, it is appropriate to conclude this chapter with an especially thought-provoking passage from Yin Haiguang’s disciple Zhang Hao 張灝:

“Inner sagehood, outer kingliness,” this concept contains a type of “personalism.” On one hand, this kind of “personalism” emphasizes a person’s sociality and considers a person’s sociality as indivisible from what makes a person human. Because of this, people must participate in society and politics. These “externally oriented” duties are a part of personality. This is essentially different in spirit from the recent Western individualism that takes the individual as the standard in contemplating political and social problems. On the other hand, the Confucians’ idea of the “inner sagehood” possesses a transcendent consciousness. Confucians believe that people’s nature is endowed by heaven, and, upon this base, individuality can forever preserve its independence and autonomy and will not be swallowed by sociality. This type of “individualism” combines sociality and individuality and yet transcends both, eliminating the opposition between individualism and collectivism in modern Western culture. It can cure the defect of partiality found in both positions and provide a new perspective for modern social thought.28