WANG Yangming’s Philosophy and Modern Theories of Democracy: A Reconstructive Interpretation

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Abstract LIU Shipei 刘师培 (1884–1919) was the first scholar to locate intellectual resources of modern democracy in WANG Yangming’s theory of the “original knowing” (liangzhi 良知). In the 1950s there was a debate between Taiwanese liberals and the “New Confucians” over the relationship between the traditional Confucianism and modern democracy. Like LIU Shipei, the “New Confucians” justified modern democracy by means of Confucian philosophy (including that of WANG Yangming). For liberals, however, the Confucian tradition encompassed only the concept of “positive liberty,” which was irrelevant to or even incompatible with modern democracy. In this article, I try to argue for the position of the “New Confucians” by reconstructing WANG Yangming’s theory of the “original knowing” from a communitarian perspective.

Keywords WANG Yangming · Communitarianism · Liberalism · Original knowing

1 LIU Shipei’s Reconstructive Interpretation of WANG Yangming’s Theory of the “Original Knowing”

Since the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), the relationship between Confucianism and modern democracy is one of the issues with which Chinese intellectuals have been deeply concerned. Even today, after a century of discussion, this issue is still regularly raised in connection with the debate over “Asian values.” In the past, a number of scholars claimed that the Confucian tradition encompassed the concept of modern democracy. However, this topic has not received recent scholarly attention. Recent discussions have focused on the following questions: Is the Confucian tradition compatible with the requirements of modern democracy? If yes, can we find intellectual resources in the Confucian tradition that will facilitate the implementation of modern democracy?

One topic that has received some attention in connection with this ongoing discussion is the relevance of WANG Yangming’s philosophy to the implementation of modern...
democracy. The 1904 book, *The Essential Meaning of the Chinese Social Contract* 中國民約精義, was the earliest Chinese publication on the relationship between Wang’s thought and democracy. Written by LIU Shipei 刘师培 (Shenshu 申叔, 1884–1919), who relied on YANG Tingdong’s 楊亭棟 translation of Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*, the book further compared some of Rousseau’s ideas with those of the Confucian tradition, claiming that the Confucian tradition already embodied 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*, Liu wrote: “in obtaining this *The 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 continues by stating: “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’s compilation extends from the *Yijing* (the *Book of Change*) to the works of the Qing scholar DAI Wang 戴望. In the section of the text devoted to WANG Yangming, he included the following three passages:

The man of benevolence (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 benevolence] 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) (Liu 1975: 701)

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 superior persons of our times should devote themselves to extending their original knowing. Then they of themselves will be able to impartially judge right and wrong, unite likes and dislikes, view others as oneself, view the country as one’s family, 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 聂文蔚) (Liu 1975: 701)

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) (Liu 1975: 701)

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

[WANG Yangming’s] theory of the original knowing is derived 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. *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” 【Book 2, Chapter 6】. These words firmly grasp the purport of Mencius’ [thesis about] the goodness of human nature,

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1 This book is contained in Liu 1975: 675-713.