

***The Chinese Liberal Spirit: Selected Writings of Xu Fuguan.*** By Fuguan Xu. Edited and translated by David Elstein. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2022. Pp. xv + 335. \$95.00 hardcover.

*The Chinese Liberal Spirit* is the first English translation of selected articles written by Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 (1903–1982), a New Confucian scholar in the twentieth century who might not be known in the Western academia. Elstein has done a great job in compiling this well-structured volume. It consists of a preface by Xu's son, an introductory essay by Elstein, and a selection of Xu Fuguan's articles divided into two parts. Elstein's introductory essay provides an excellent outline for English readers to understand the basics of Xu Fuguan's thought.

Part One of the book contains three autobiographical essays (Chapters 1–3) in which Xu Fuguan tells his readers how his method of study evolved through time, recalls why he published the journal, *Democratic Review* (*minzhu pinglun* 民主評論), and mourned the death of his friend Yin Haiguang 殷海光 (1919–1969). These three essays help portray a multidimensional image of Xu Fuguan. Xu came from an ordinary peasant family in Hubei and grew up in the age of revolutions and wars during the first two decades of the twentieth century. In the first essay (Chapter 1), Xu retraced his hard work in reading both modern and traditional books, which allowed him a comprehensive acquisition of both traditional Chinese and modern Western knowledges. With this essay, Elstein presents Xu Fuguan as a knowledge-lover. Bothered by his service in the Nationalist army for almost a decade, Xu finally met his mentor Xiong Shili 熊十力 (1885–1968) in Sichuan in the early 1940s during the Sino-Japanese War. A first-generation New Confucian, Xiong guided Xu towards the correct way to read Confucian classics and inspired his interest in studying Confucianism. After Japan's surrender in 1945, Xu began to devote more time to Confucian studies. In the early 1950s, he even resigned from his position in the Nationalist army and became a Confucian scholar in Taiwan.

In the second essay (Chapter 2), Xu Fuguan recalled how he founded *Democratic Review*. By including this short piece, Elstein presents Xu not only as a theorist, but a practitioner activist who was enthusiastically promoting Confucianism in the modern world. The essay was published in the last issue of *Democratic Review*, which ceased publication in 1966 because of a lack of funding. Given such a background of the essay, Elstein implicitly shows how disappointed Xu was with the end of the journal. In the third essay (Chapter 3), Xu mourned the death of Yin Haiguang, his erstwhile intellectual adversary and longtime respected friend. As a liberal who opposed Chinese tradition, Yin was once an outspoken critic of Xu's ideas. Having experienced the crackdown on democracy movement in Taiwan by Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 (1887–1975), however, Yin began to seek consolation from the Chinese tradition. This provided a chance for Yin to reconcile with Xu and made friends with him. Yin died of gastric cancer at the age of fifty in 1969, and Xu wrote the essay in

memory of him. Through this essay, Elstein presents Xu Fuguan as a broad-minded person, as reflected in his relationship with Yin Haiguang.

Part Two of the book includes twelve important articles that cover the core values of Xu Fuguan's ethical and political thought. Elstein successfully offers his readers a glimpse of Xu's thought with his selection of articles. These articles present Xu's emphasis on ethics in democratic governance and are ordered to guide readers through Xu's thought step by step. The first article (Chapter 4) reflects Xu's view and criticisms of problems in Chinese politics. The next four articles (Chapters 5–8) present Xu's views on Confucian political thought and its compatibility with the modern world. Xu also discusses how the Confucian ideal of good governance could be transformed to fit in with modern democracy and how scholarly studies would interact with politics.

The next few articles turn to the relationship between ethics and politics. In Chapter 9, Xu Fuguan gave a detailed elaboration of "heart-mind" (*xin* 心), a Confucian notion referring to "the source of moral values in human life" (*rensheng jiazhi de genyuan* 人生價值的根源). It is an "embodied learning" (*xing er zhong xue* 形而中學) and can be manifested in one's everyday life. Xu also explained its importance in Chinese culture. Chapter 10 explains why and how Confucius laid the foundation for a liberal society in China. Chapter 11 compares the Confucian concepts of "cultivating oneself" (*xiuji* 修己) and "governing others" (*zhiren* 治人) and discusses their significance in Chinese political thought. In Chapter 12, Xu particularly refuted the criticisms from the Nationalist government on liberalism in 1956. In these articles, Xu established the essentiality of ethics in democratic governance. In the next two articles (Chapters 13–14), Xu Fuguan investigated into the concepts of the "rule of man" (*renzhi* 人治), "rule of law" (*fazhi* 法治), and "rule by virtue" (*dezhi* 德治), as reflected in the texts of Mencius and Confucius. Elstein ends the volume with an article in which Xu compared the Confucian and Daoist interpretations of "personal cultivation" (*rengexiuyang* 人格修養) in premodern literature. This is one of Xu's final articles before his death in 1982.

With the selected articles, it is not difficult for readers to learn that the Confucian notion of "rule by virtue" occupied a crucial position in Xu Fuguan's ideal democratic system. As seen from the following passage in Chapter 5, Xu wrote:

Oppression and tying by power is intolerable and legal binding is only an external force, even if it is effective. External forces need to be based on a foundation of internal relationships, otherwise in the end the bonds will not be secure and people's nature will not be able to develop freely. "Rule by virtue" aims at using the virtue people already have to establish internal relations between them.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Xu Fuguan, *The Chinese Liberal Spirit: Selected Writings of Xu Fuguan*, ed. and trans. David Elstein (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2022), p. 69.

Indeed, from Xu's perspective, "rule by virtue" in the Confucian democratic ideal might be a prerequisite for a democratic system based on rights and duties.<sup>2</sup> "Rule of law," as an external regulation, could not be effective without the manifestation of the internal "rule by virtue". As Elstein points out in another monograph, Xu believed that sole reliance on law was inadequate for good governance.<sup>3</sup> He further elaborated this in the translator's introduction in Chapter 14, "The Origin of Kongzi's Idea of Rule by Virtue."

David Elstein's translation is largely accurate except a minor error in Xu Fuguan's essay about Yin Haiguang. On page 38, Xu received the letter about Yin Haiguang's death not from Jin Guangji, but Jin Yaoji (Ambrose King 金耀基), a sociologist, according to the Chinese original.<sup>4</sup> The editor is also able to capture the meaning of the many complicated Confucian concepts elaborated by Xu, such as the several "natures" (*xing* 性), i.e., "human nature" (*renxing* 人性), "patterned nature" (*lixing* 理性), "moral nature" (*dexing* 德性), and "cognitive nature" (*zhixing* 知性). The huge number of his careful annotations of Chinese terms, backgrounds of key figures and events in Chinese history, and other necessary information help non-China specialists understand what Xu referred to in his articles. Without these annotations, it would have been difficult for readers to comprehend the historical contexts in Xu's discussions of the various philosophical concepts and issues in Chinese politics.

Moreover, in many of the selected articles, Xu Fuguan acknowledged the help of his fellow New Confucians, Tang Junyi 唐君毅 (1909–1978) and Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–1995). This demonstrates the friendship and unity among the New Confucian scholars, although they might have different interpretations of certain concepts. Mentioning the names of Tang Junyi and Mou Zongsan may also inspire non-Chinese readers to trace translations of Tang and Mou's works and open the door for specialists in Western philosophy for possible comparative studies between the two systems of philosophy.

David Elstein's compilation of this volume definitely helps introduce Xu Fuguan's thought to non-Chinese readers. However, I do have some suggestions for the editor's consideration. Elstein uses the term "Ruiist" and "Ruism" rather than "Confucian" and "Confucianism" to translate the term *rujia* 儒家, suggesting in "A Note on Language" that this would show "greater fidelity to the Chinese terms" (p. xi). However, the

---

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Kai-chung Yung, *Chinese Émigré Intellectuals and Their Quest for Liberal Values in the Cold War, 1949–1969* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> David Elstein, *Democracy in Contemporary Confucian Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 73.

<sup>4</sup> Xu Fuguan, "Tongdao wudi, tongdao wuyou" 痛悼吾敵 痛悼吾友, in Xu, *Rujia zhengzhi sixiang yu minzhu ziyou renquan* 儒家政治思想與民主自由人權, ed. Xiao Xinyi (Taipei: Bashi niandai chubanshe, 1979), p. 321.

target readers of this book are primarily those who do not read the Chinese language. Such an unconventional translation may confuse the readers who have heard of Confucianism but do not grasp the meaning of *ru* 儒. Replacing “Confucius” with “Kongzi” and “Mencius” with “Mengzi,” may also puzzle readers who are not familiar with the Chinese transliteration. It would be better if the editor could provide in the introductory chapter a more detailed explanation of what *ru* means in Chinese and substantiate why the use of “Ruism/Ruist” is better than “Confucianism/Confucian.” Adding such an explanation will help promote the use of “Ruism/Ruist” in the place of “Confucianism/Confucian,” convince other scholars to follow suit, and allow it to gain currency among non-China specialists.

Moreover, while Elstein has included a translator’s introduction at the beginning of each chapter with some background information about the reasons Xu Fuguan wrote that article, he may also want to add a supplement at the end of each chapter, especially those in Part Two, to further elaborate the key philosophical and political notions that Xu Fuguan mentioned therein. I notice that the editor has done so for some key concepts in the endnotes, such as “lineage of the way” (*daotong* 道統), “objectify” (*keguanhua* 客觀化), “real world” (*xianshi shijie* 現實世界), “subjective” (*zhuguan* 主觀), “natural” (*ziran* 自然), “innate moral awareness” (*liangzhi* 良知), “affective inspiration” (*ganfa* 感法), and “wondrous technique like embryonic breathing” (*taisi zhi miaoshu* 胎息之妙術). It could be a good idea to move these explanations to the main text in the forms of supplement or glossary attached at the end of each chapter. In that way, non-Chinese readers could immediately get a sense of what the complicated terms mean after reading each article and do not have to flip to the endnotes for the explanations.

There are some other important concepts raised by Xu Fuguan that might require more thorough elaborations for the readers. Elstein has done a nice job in the introduction to explain what “concern consciousness” (*yohuan yishi* 憂患意識) means in Xu’s writings. But there are other complicated concepts that deserve in-depth explanations, given that readers may not be able to grasp the meaning of these terms by just reading the articles. For example, in Chapter 7, “The Chinese Way of Governance,” Xu mentioned “dual subjectivity” (*erchong de zhutixing* 二重的主體性). Under the concept of people-centeredness (*minben zhuyi* 民本主義), ordinary people are the “subjects” (*zhuti* 主體) in politics. In reality, however, the monarch was the actual “subject” in premodern China. “Dual subjectivity” was, thus, an important idea in Xu’s conception of a modern Confucian parliamentary democracy in which members of the parliament follow the “way of official” (*chendao* 臣道), while the ordinary people who elect their representatives follow the “way of ruler” (*jundao* 君道). This is a substantial shift in the roles of the rulers and the ordinary people when realizing Confucianism in modern democracy. Elstein could have expanded his elaboration of these terms and concepts so as to give his readers a clearer sense of what Xu Fuguan was conveying.

It is also desirable to elaborate Xu's interpretation of "rule by virtue" more deeply when discussing his political thought. In Chapter 5, "The Construction and Advancement of Ruist Political Thought," Xu Fuguan explained the term in a complicated way, which might be hard for non-Chinese to comprehend. As mentioned previously, Elstein has discussed the concept briefly in the translator's introduction in Chapter 14. He may consider moving the discussion to Chapter 5 and expanding it. The notion definitely deserves a more in-depth explanation.

Another concept in Xu's thought is "self-consciousness" (*wo de zijue* 我的自覺) mentioned in Chapter 5. He believed it to be the origin of modern democracy and defined it as the realization of the individual's "struggles for one's own right to life, independence, and self-mastery in regard to others" (p. 73). The right is based on "natural law" (*ziranfa* 自然法) of "freedom and equality of human life" and "[social] contract theory" (*qiyuelun* 契約論) of "mutual agreement" (p. 73). Xu also suggested that rulers should possess a sense of "moral self-consciousness" (*daode de zijue* 道德的自覺). In that way, the ruler will respect human nature so as to uphold the concept of people-centeredness. Some concepts as mentioned in this and the previous paragraphs are indeed quite difficult for non-Chinese readers to understand. The editor may want to provide further interpretations on these ideas in a supplement attached to the end of the chapters.

There are also other important articles that Elstein may consider including in a sequel to the volume in the future. In addition to ethics and politics, Xu Fuguan wrote a number of articles on Chinese culture and tradition that distinguished "culture" from "tradition" quite clearly. Examples of these articles include "The Hierarchical Nature of Chinese Culture," "Tradition and Culture," "On Tradition," and "What Is Tradition?"<sup>5</sup> In these works, Xu Fuguan divided Chinese culture into "upper-class culture" (*gaoceng wenhua* 高層文化) and "grassroots culture" (*jiiceng wenhua* 基層文化). He argued that upper-class culture belonged to the intellectuals; it was progressive (*qianjin* 前進) with an emphasis on freedom. Grassroots culture belongs to the commoners; it was conservative (*baoshou* 保守) with an emphasis on regularity (*guilü* 規律). These two kinds of culture were indeed in conflict. The key to harmonize the conflict was

---

<sup>5</sup> Xu Fuguan, "Zhongguo wenhua de cengjixing" 中國文化的層級性, in Xu Fuguan, *Xu Fuguan wenlu xuancui* 徐復觀文錄選萃, ed. Xiao Xinyi 蕭欣義 (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1980), pp. 117–20; Xu Fuguan, "Chuantong yu wenhua" 傳統與文化, in Xu, *Xu Fuguan wenlu xuancui*, pp. 97–100; Xu Fuguan, "Lun chuantong" 論傳統, in Xu, *Xu Fuguan wenlu xuancui*, pp. 105–6; Xu Fuguan, "Shenme shi chuantong?" 什麼是傳統?, in Xu, *Xu Fuguan zawan bubian* 徐復觀雜文補編, eds. Li Hanji 黎漢基 and Li Minghui 李明輝, vol. 1 (Taipei: Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica, 2001), pp. 168–71.

tradition (*chuantong* 傳統), which was further divided into “low-level tradition” (*diciyuan chuantong* 低次元傳統) and “high-level tradition” (*gaociyuan chuantong* 高次元傳統). The former was from grassroots culture and unable to improve itself, while the latter can synthesize grassroots and upper-class cultures to create a national culture enjoyed by all Chinese people.<sup>6</sup> From Xu Fuguan’s perspective, ethics, politics, and culture intertwined with each other in Confucianism. It might be a good idea to include the above-mentioned articles on culture in a sequel to the volume. If the purpose of translating Xu’s works is to introduce his thought to Western readers, we should not neglect his views on culture and on how culture interacts with ethics and politics.

Xu Fuguan co-authored “Declaration on Behalf of Chinese Culture Respectfully Announced to the People of the World” published in 1958. Although it is not clear, as Elstein suggests, how much Xu contributed to the drafting of the declaration, the declaration’s full text could also be included as an appendix in a possible sequel to this volume. A complete translation of the declaration was published in *Chinese Culture*, a Taiwan-based periodical, in October 1960.<sup>7</sup> Including the complete translation will help non-Chinese readers understand what the New Confucian scholars would like to achieve in the Cold War era when they had to escape from the Chinese mainland and sojourn in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

In short, Elstein has made a good selection of articles among Xu Fuguan’s numerous writings. The core concepts of Xu Fuguan’s ethical and political thought are well presented in this volume. This is definitely a good beginning for specialists in modern Chinese philosophy to introduce Xu Fuguan and his thought to the non-Chinese academic and general readers. That said, this volume might benefit from more elaborations to crucial notions that Xu mentioned in his writings. Nevertheless, the editor has made a significant contribution to the study of contemporary New Confucianism in the Western academia. I look forward to a sequel in which the editor could translate Xu’s writings about Chinese culture and tradition and other themes.

DOI: 10.29708/JCS.CUHK.202401\_(78).0007

KENNETH KAI-CHUNG YUNG  
*University of Sydney*

---

<sup>6</sup> Yung, *Chinese Émigré Intellectuals and Their Quest for Liberal Values in the Cold War, 1949–1969*, pp. 163–66.

<sup>7</sup> Hsu Foo-kwan, Carson Chang, Tang Chun-i, Mou Chung-san, and Hsieh Yu-wei, “A Manifesto on the Reappraisal of Chinese Culture: Our Joint Understanding of the Sinological Study Relating to World Culture Outlook,” *Chinese Culture* 3.1 (October 1960): 1–71.