

# Political Orientations and the Dilemma in the Yangming School

Guoxiang Peng\*

## Abstract

There were various dimensions to *Yangmingxue* 陽明學, or the Yangming school, as defined not only by Wang Yangming 王陽明 himself but also by his students and followers in the mid-late Ming dynasty. This article will treat *Yangmingxue* as a whole from the perspective of political culture. It will explore two political orientations in Wang Yangming school, namely *dejunxingdao* 得君行道 (“carrying out the Way through the support of the emperor”) and *jueminxingdao* 覺民行道 (“carrying out the Way by enlightening the common people”), analyze the implications of these two orientations and scrutinize their relationship. Also it will examine and evaluate the concept of the “common people as political subjects” implied in *Yangmingxue* and the political ideal in the Confucian tradition. The core questions that will be discussed are: First, how should we understand the political orientation, *jueminxingdao*, pioneered by the Yangming school, in addition to *dejunxingdao*? Second, how should we understand the relationship between *jueminxingdao* and *dejunxingdao* in the Yangming school? Third, how should we understand the concept of the “common people as political subjects” implied in *Yangmingxue* and what is the dilemma it had to face? Last, why the Confucian political subject could not be established and how to establish it.

**Keywords:** Yangming School, Political Orientations, *dejunxingdao*, *jueminxingdao*, Confucian Political Ideal

---

\* Guoxiang Peng is Qiushi Distinguished Professor of Chinese Philosophy, Intellectual History, and Religions at Zhejiang University. E-mail: peng\_gx@126.com

## I. Introduction

Before starting my discussion, I want to define several concepts that serve as the basis of this article. The first is the term *Yangmingxue* 陽明學 (Yangming school), which is originally from Japanese scholarship and basically refers to the school of Wang Yangming in the mid-late Ming dynasty. The opposite to *Yangmingxue* in the Neo-Confucian tradition is “*Zhuzixue* 朱子學” (Master Zhu school), a term that also originated from Japanese scholarship and refers to the school of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) in the Southern Song dynasty and his later followers. The big difference between *Yangmingxue* and *Zhuzixue* as two schools, however, is that almost all the students and followers of Zhu Xi are real followers who did not create anything new, while many students and followers of Wang Yangming not only followed Wang Yangming's teachings but also had their own philosophical developments. So, the Yangming school is defined not only by the thought and practice of Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529), the great Confucian philosopher of fifteenth and sixteenth century China, but also by those of his students and followers in the mid-late Ming dynasty.

The second and third concepts I need to define as two political orientations are *dejunxingdao* 得君行道 and *jueminxingdao* 覺民行道. Generally, the former means to make the Confucian Way—the Confucian political and social ideal—prevail by getting the support of the emperor, while the latter means to make the Confucian Way prevail by enlightening the common people. Furthermore, the former was usually practiced by Confucian intellectuals, especially in the Song dynasty, while the latter was prominently promoted by the Yangming school in the mid-late Ming dynasty. So, it seems there was a shift of the emphasis in Confucian political orientation from *dejunxingdao* to *jueminxingdao* that occurred in the period from Song to Ming. By the way, *dejunxingdao* and *jueminxingdao* were initially used by the late professor Yu Ying-shih 余英時 (1930-2021) to discuss the political culture in the Song and Ming dynasties, although he did not clearly and carefully define them. In this sense, this article is also written in memory of him.

In this paper, I will observe and analyze the Yangming school as not only an intellectual trend but also a political and social movement

from the perspective of “political culture,” especially the two political orientations noted above and the implied dilemma in this trend. Specifically, I will tackle the following questions: First, how should we understand *jueminxingdao* in addition to *dejunxingdao*? Secondly, how should we understand the relationship between *jueminxingdao* and *dejunxingdao* as two different orientations in the Yangming school? Thirdly, how should we understand the concept of “the common people as political subjects” implied in *Yangmingxue* and the dilemma it had to face. Last, but not least, how could the Confucian political subject be established, and the Confucian political and social ideal be realized?

## II. How Should We Understand *Jueminxingdao*?

The late professor Yu Ying-shih made an inspiring observation on the *Yangmingxue* 阳明学, or Yangming school, of the mid-late Ming dynasty in his works on the interplay between scholar-officials and merchants and the intellectual transformation from the Song dynasty to the Ming dynasty. He believed, compared with the political orientation of the Confucian scholar-officials in the Song dynasty, that the political orientation of the Confucianism in the mid-late Ming dynasty represented by the school of Wang Yangming had already transformed from *dejunxingdao* 得君行道 (carrying out the Way through the support of the emperor) to *jueminxingdao* 覺民行道 (carrying out the Way by enlightening of the common people).<sup>1</sup> Namely, for Yu, primarily due to the political pressure and persecution in the Ming dynasty, the political orientation of Confucianism represented by the Yangming school had moved toward society and away from government.

This observation and judgment are based on ample historical records. I think it is tenable. On the other hand, if *dejunxingdao* means that the Confucian scholar-officials were trying to gain the trust and sufficient support of the emperor in order to carry out the political ideal of Confucianism, like the historical case of Wang Anshi 王安石(1021-

---

<sup>1</sup> This point was fully expressed in Yu's book *Neo-Confucianism and Political Culture* (2004).

86), how should we understand *jueminxingdao* as another way promoted by those figures in the Yangming school in addition to *dejunxingdao*? This question deserves to be pondered and still awaits adequate consideration.

In order to explore this question, there are a few related issues that we have to make clear. First, in the Chinese expression *jueminxingdao*, *jue* 覺 means “to enlighten,” *min* 民 means “the common people,” and therefore *juemin* 覺民 means “to awaken (the reflective self-awareness of) the common people.” But what kind of self-awareness could this enlightenment make people have? Is it a self-awareness of being a political subject? Or is this self-awareness simply ethical and moral? Second, while the Confucian scholar-officials representing *Yangmingxue* are the ones who enlightened the people, who were the subjects of *xingdao* 行道, or the “carrying out the Way”? Was it those scholars who transformed the common people from being unenlightened to enlightened? Or could the common people themselves also be subjects of *xingdao*? Third, is “the Way” (*dao* 道) in *jueminxingdao* the same as “the Way” (*dao* 道) in *dejunxingdao*?

The Way of *jueminxingdao* featured by the Confucian scholars in the Yangming school in the mid-late Ming dynasty consisted of various lectures to the public, known as *jianghui* 講會 (“lecture gatherings”). Some of these lecture gatherings consisted of scholarly discussions among scholars in the Yangming school such as those recorded by Luo Hongxian 羅洪先 (1504–64) in his *Dongyouji* 冬遊記 (Travel Records in Winter), which in some respects are like our academic meetings today. However, most of the content of these lecture gatherings was directed toward the public. Based on their talks to the public, we can tell that what they wanted to do was not to instill a self-awareness of being political subjects. Rather, just as traditional Confucian scholars had done, what they mostly wanted to do was to make people have a self-awareness of being ethical and moral subjects and thereby to help create an ambience and custom of “doing good and getting rid of evil” (為善去惡) in society. This can also be proven by the social movement of merit and demerit that was popular in the mid-late Ming dynasty, in which many scholars in the school of Wang Yangming widely participated (Browkaw 1991).

However, since there is no clear distinction between the sphere of ethics and morality and that of politics in Confucian tradition, in the process of *juemin*, namely the effort to make the common people enlightened, the common people's awareness of being political subjects, not only of being ethical and moral subjects, will unavoidably be awakened. Guan Zhidao 管志道 (1536-1608), also one of the followers of *Yangmingxue*, once said,

Wang Gen 王艮 (1483-1541) advocates that the genealogy of the Way comes from the common people. Inevitably this entailed that the Way to be a minister of the emperor would be eclipsed by the Way to be a teacher of the emperor; how could this not inspire people to generate a mind of defying the emperor?<sup>2</sup> (Guan *Shimenqiuzhengdu* 師門求證牘, 23; as quoted in Araki [1979], 137)

On the one hand, this critique of the socialization and popularization of Confucianism promoted by the thought and practice of Wang Gen, one of the noted disciples of Wang Yangming, was a reflection of Guan's own standpoint of venerating the monarchy. On the other, it indicated that the *jueminxingdao* practiced by members of the school of Wang Yangming such as Wang Gen could possibly awaken people's self-consciousness of being political subjects.

In *dejunxingdao*, the subject of *dejun* 得君 ("to gain the support of the emperor") is no doubt Confucian scholar-officials. As for *xingdao*, the subject is not only Confucian scholar-officials but also the emperor. The emperor was even the more crucial subject. When we take it for granted that Confucian scholar-officials are the subjects of *xingdao*, we actually look at this matter from the point of view of Confucian scholar-officials. Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹 (989-1052), a noted Confucian scholar-official of the Northern Song dynasty, once said that one should "take responsibility for the whole world" (*yitianxiaweijiren* 以天下为己任), which became well-known in later Chinese history and reflected the self-consciousness that Confucian scholar-officials should be political subjects. From the perspective of the emperor, however, this saying

---

<sup>2</sup> 王氏興則道統自庶人出，無奈以師道蔽臣道，而啟天下卑君之心乎？English translation by the author.

was understood differently by different emperors. The idea that the governance of the world should be jointly done by the emperor and the Confucian scholar-officials was realized to a certain degree only for some emperors in the Song dynasty. This point has been well discussed in Professor Yu Ying-shih's book on Zhu Xi and the political culture of the Song dynasty (Yu 2011). On the other hand, emperors such as Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328-98), Ming's first emperor, and Yongzheng 雍正 (1678-1735), Qing's fifth emperor, were both well-known as cold-blood dictators; for them, the subject of *xingdao* was exclusively the emperor. In their eyes, if Confucian scholar-officials thought they should also be subjects in *xingdao*, it would constitute a threat to the monarchy and autocracy. Now, we should consider the following question: compared with these two different understandings of the subject in *dejunxingdao*, how should we understand the subject in *jueminxingdao*?

It is easy to understand that Confucian scholar-officials are the subjects in both *dejun* and *juemin*. But how should we understand the subject of *xingdao*? In the context of *jueminxingdao* promoted by the Yangming school, the subject of *xingdao* seemingly has nothing to do with the emperor but only aims to get Confucian scholar-officials and the common people involved; namely, only Confucian intellectuals and the common people are subjects of *xingdao*. Accordingly, we should carefully discern and consider how the Confucian intellectuals and the common people play their respective roles as subjects in the process of *xingdao*.

Confucian intellectuals are the primary subjects of *jueminxingdao*. Because teaching the common people has always been a duty of Confucian intellectuals, *juemin*, per se, is a process of *xingdao*. Confucius said, "It is impossible to be together with birds and beasts, as if they were the same with us. If I were not to be with these people—with mankind—with whom shall I to be?"<sup>5</sup> In this sense, he already set up the basic orientation of the Confucian tradition. So, if *juemin* and *xingdao* can be regarded as two sides of the same process, the subjects of the two sides and the process are obviously Confucian intellectuals. But what we need to consider now is the issue of *min* 民 ("the common people").

---

<sup>5</sup> 鳥獸不可與同群，吾非斯人之徒與而誰與？ English translation by the author.

Namely, although Confucian intellectuals are indispensable in their role as subjects of *xingdao*, the question is: once enlightened, could the common people also become subjects of *xingdao*?

From the perspective of Yangmingxue, there is no doubt that, in addition to Confucian intellectuals, the common people, once enlightened, are also subjects of *xingdao*. The idea that “everybody has a Confucius in his/her mind” (人人心中有仲尼) or “sages are everywhere” (满街都是圣人) was particularly stressed in the Yangming school. So, this idea naturally leads to the acknowledgement that the common people are subjects of *xingdao*. In this regard, the relationship between Confucian intellectuals and the common people is just the relationship between those who are enlightened earlier and those who are enlightened later. In terms of the *liangzhi* 良知, the intuitive knowledge of morality that everybody intrinsically has, there is no difference between Confucian intellectuals and the common people. In this sense, once enlightened, the common people also could undertake the calling of *xingdao*. In fact, the socialization and popularization of Confucianism promoted by Wang Gen and his followers usually known as the Taizhou school (泰州学派), which included such Confucian populists as Yan Jun 颜钧 (1504-96), He Xinyin 何心隐 (1517-79), Han Zhen 韩贞 (1509-85), and Zhu Shu 朱恕 (1501-83), who were not well-educated and did not participate in the civil service examination at all, as well as the numerous common people who were followers of the Yangming school but not recorded in historical books, are all reflections of this idea regarding who could serve as subjects of *xingdao*. I previously mentioned Guan Zhidao’s critique of Wang Gen and the Taizhou school. This clearly indicates that, in the view of Confucian scholar-officials such as Guan Zhidao, the establishment of the common people’s self-identity through the socialization and popularization of the Yangming school had the consequence of awakening their awareness of being political subjects. For Guan Zhidao, this would be a challenge to the authority of the monarchy. His claim, “how could this not inspire people to generate a mind of defying the emperor?” referred precisely to this possibility.

Guan Zhidao’s standpoint of venerating the monarchy, as I pointed out earlier, also suggested that the orientation of *dejunxingdao* had not disappeared from the scene with the rise of the orientation of *jueminxing-*

*dao*. So, what we should consider next is the relationship between these two different orientations.

But before we proceed, we need to clarify a question directly related to how to understand *jueminxingdao*. The question is whether the *dao* 道 (“Way”) in *jueminxingdao* and the *dao* 道 in *dejunxingdao* are the same “*dao*.” In modern language, the “*dao*” in *dejunxingdao* primarily refers to the political ideal of Confucianism, while the “*dao*” in *jueminxingdao* is more related to the ethical and moral principles of Confucianism. Of course, this is speaking analytically. Given the fact that throughout the entire Confucian tradition, there was no demarcation line drawn between the political sphere and the ethical and moral sphere, we should be clear that the “*dao*” in *dejunxingdao* is not only political but also ethical and moral. Similarly, the “*dao*” in *jueminxingdao* is not only ethical and moral but also has political and social implications and significance. For instance, the blueprint depicted in the “*Datong* 大同” (Great Harmony) chapter in the Confucian classic *Liji* 禮記 (Book of Rites) is hardly to be analyzed and evaluated in terms of the dichotomy between the ethical and moral and the political and social. In this sense, therefore, the “*dao*” in *dejunxingdao* and the “*dao*” in *jueminxingdao*—the two different orientations—both refer to the political ideal of Confucianism. For modern people who are accustomed to the dichotomy between the ethical and moral on the one hand and the political and social on the other, the only thing they need to keep in mind is that this political ideal as a blueprint also has ethical and moral implications and significance.

In short, what differentiates *jueminxingdao* from *dejunxingdao* lies in the transformation that the Confucian intellectuals represented by Wang Yangming and his followers made in changing the target of their primary political appeal from the emperor to the common people. Accordingly, the subject of *xingdao* was no longer a combination of Confucian scholar-officials and the emperor but the integration of Confucian intellectuals and the common people. This probably was the most important and significant feature for the *jueminxingdao* as a political orientation different from *dejunxingdao*.



### III. How Should We Understand the Relationship Between *Jueminxingdao* and *Dejunxingdao*?

In a previously published article, I pointed out that we should properly understand Professor Yu Ying-shih's view about the transformation from *dejunxingdao* 得君行道 to *jueminxingdao* 觉民行道 (Peng 2001). In my opinion, the transformation he observed should be understood as a shift of emphasis rather than a change in which the former was completely replaced by the latter. But the emphasis of that article was not particularly on the political orientation implied in the Yangming school. So, although my view has already been presented, it was not fully elaborated. Now, let me offer further discussion of this issue.

Specifically, one point I made in that article is that Wang Ji 王畿 (1498-1583), one of the most seminal philosophers after Wang Yang-ming in the Neo-Confucian tradition, compiled a book called the *Zhongjianlu* 中鑒錄 (*Record of Eunuchs*) when emperor Wanli ascended the throne. The book not only includes and categorizes almost all the biographies of eunuchs in Chinese history from ancient times to Wang Ji's time, but also includes Wang Ji's personal evaluation for each category and for almost every eunuch. Wang Ji's aim was to influence contemporary and future eunuchs through this book and, ultimately, to get eunuchs with good character to influence the emperor. Obviously, this was a vivid case of *dejunxingdao* as practiced by Wang Ji. Furthermore, the significance of this case suggests that for Confucian intellectuals such as Wang Ji, the political orientation of *dejunxingdao* as both an idea and a practice had never been abandoned. When there was a chance, it would come up.

Wang Ji's is not an isolated case. Among the followers of Wang Yangming in the mid-late Ming dynasty, there were other accomplished Confucian scholars who also endorsed and practiced *dejunxingdao*. For example, like Wang Ji, Luo Rufang 羅汝芳 (1515-88) was also a Confucian scholar devoted to enlightening the common people through public teaching. Compared with Wang Ji, most of whose audience were still Confucian intellectuals or educated people, the audience that Luo Rufang addressed included more common people. Intriguingly, it was Luo who spared no efforts to advocate in his public teaching

the *Shengyuliuyan* 聖諭六言 (Six Words of the Imperial Decree), which was comprised of the selected words of Zhu Yuanzhang. Luo himself even wrote the *Taizuliuyuanxun* 太祖六諭演訓 (Six Mandates of Great Ancestor), a commentary and interpretive book on the *Shengyuliuyan*. In his writings, including both his public teaching as well as his words to his family such as his last words to his children and grandchildren, Zhu Yuanzhang was depicted as a sage-king who inherited the Way of Yao and Shun, two legendary sage-kings in Confucian narrative. For Luo, the common people could eventually become Confucian *junzi* 君子, and even worthies and sages, as long as they followed the teaching of the *Shengyuliuyan*. We cannot help feeling, when reading his writings, that the Confucian political ideal had already been realized by emperors such as Zhu Yuanzhang.

Another example is Zhou Rudeng 周汝登 (1547-1629), a student of Wang Ji, and one of the most outstanding philosophers after Wang Yangming and Wang Ji. Zhou Rudeng once wrote an essay to Gan Ziting 甘紫亭 when Gan was summoned by the emperor and about to leave Zhejiang for Beijing. In this essay, we can clearly see that Zhou Rudeng was very excited about Gan's political future. His excitement was due to Gan Ziting's promotion and strongly contrasted with his lament about Wang Yangming. The reason Zhou made such a contrast is that Gan Ziting's life and career experience were very similar to those of Wang Yangming. Unfortunately, Gan died on his way to Beijing. As a result, both Wang Yangming and Gan Ziting never took office in the central government. Zhou said in the essay, "Yangming has never been appointed to be an official in the central government. He deserved to be prime minister. But unfortunately, this has never happened. It's truly a great regret."<sup>4</sup> This expression clearly indicates that the *dejunxingdao* political orientation was strongly rooted in Zhou's mind. For Zhou, regardless of whether or not a Confucian scholar was able to win the support of the emperor, *dejun* was still an important avenue for Confucian scholars to "carry out the Way" (*xingdao*).

In fact, it is understandable that, for the leading figures of the Yangming school such as Wang Ji, Luo Rufang, and Zhou Rudeng,

---

<sup>4</sup> 陽明寄居閩外，未獲一日立朝；相業未彰，人用為恨。English translation by the author.

*dejunxingdao* was never abandoned and continued to play an important role in their political orientation. Why is this understandable? I will explore the reasons for this later.

Wang Ji, Luo Rufang, and Zhou Rudeng were representatives of the Yangming school who embodied the orientation of *jueminxingdao*. But they did not give up the orientation of *dejunxingdao*. So, for scholars like Guan Zhidao who highly praised the monarchy, it is also understandable that they would immediately feel the possible challenge to the monarchy from the idea implied in the movement promoted by Wang Gen that every individual can be the subject who “carries out the Way” (*xingdao*). Conventionally, the conflicts between Geng Dingxiang 耿定向 (1524-97) and Li Zhi 李贽 (1527-1602) and between orthodox scholar-officials and He Xinyin were mostly understood and interpreted from a perspective of social ethics and personal morality. Beyond this, the different political orientations, especially different understandings of who should be responsible for being a political subject, played an important role in these conflicts. Obviously, for orthodox Confucian scholar-officials such as Geng Dingxiang, who also highly praised the monarchy, the common people should not play the role of political subject. In their view, it should be the emperor and Confucian scholar-officials, rather than Confucian intellectuals and the common people, who take on the responsibility of being political subjects.

Accordingly, from the perspective of political orientation, an interesting phenomenon appeared in the Yangming school. On the one hand, a new political orientation, *jueminxingdao*, was promoted by Wang Yangming and carried on by his followers. For Wang Yangming himself, initially it could be understood as an inevitable consequence of his failed political career. Eventually, however, it became his deliberate choice. In other words, even though Wang Yangming had to move to *jueminxingdao* as an alternative to *dejunxingdao*, which he was unable to practice, *jueminxingdao* gradually became his voluntary choice and was primarily practiced and promoted. Only in this light is it understandable why he prepared and delivered so many lectures to the public. The example of Wang Gen, who not only repeatedly rejected being an official himself but also did not allow his descendants to participate in the civil service examination, expressed the ideal of *jueminxingdao* as his

personal self-awareness and voluntary choice.

On the other hand, as I pointed out previously, at the same time *jueminxingdao* featured as the political orientation of the Yangming school, *dejunxingdao* was not completely given up by scholars such as Wang Ji, Luo Rufang, and Zhou Rudeng. Like a dormant volcano, *dejunxingdao* could become active and practiced whenever an opportunity to do so came up. Furthermore, a more interesting consideration is that it was not simply the case that some scholars believed in *jueminxingdao* whereas others insisted on *dejunxingdao* in the Yangming school. Rather, the situation was that the two political orientations were adopted by those scholars simultaneously. Of course, there were a few cases in the Yangming school who made an either-or choice between the two orientations. But most made a both-and choice.

The case of Wang Ji is illustrative. We know that he did not have as rich a political experience as Wang Yangming had. He was not well established in his political career at all. But the similarity between Wang Ji and Wang Yangming was that Wang Ji also experienced frustration in his career and had an even worse experience. Wang Ji was dismissed from office. (What happened and why is still unclear, and it is outside of the scope of this paper to discuss it here.) But one thing is clear: immediately after his dismissal from office, Wang Ji started to devote himself fully to his nationwide public lectures. As depicted in various biographies of Wang Ji, he still traveled to deliver public lectures even at the old age of eighty. So, one could think that he completely gave up the orientation of *dejunxingdao*. But, as I have examined in detail, events concerning the compilation of the *Zhongjianlu* clearly prove that he did not completely abandon the possibility of *dejunxingdao*.

Of course, for scholars in the Yangming school such as Wang Ji, *dejunxingdao* did not have to be like Wang Anshi's experience in the Northern Song dynasty; Confucian scholar-officials did not have to receive strong support from the emperor and acquire enough political power to carry out Confucian political and social ideals. Rather, for the Confucian scholars in the school of Wang Yangming, *dejunxingdao* meant they could influence the ideas and practices of the emperor in various ways and eventually realize the Confucian political ideal through their influence upon the emperor. Accordingly, there was a big

difference between Confucian scholars like Wang Anshi in the Northern Song dynasty and Confucian scholars like Wang Ji in the mid-late Ming dynasty. For the former, the subject of *dejunxingdao* was Confucian scholar-officials and the emperor together; for the latter, the subject of *dejunxingdao* was only the emperor. In the second situation, what Confucian scholars could do was simply step down and try to influence the emperor indirectly by influencing the eunuchs first.

Why is it that, even though he was severely frustrated in political life and became known as a teacher instead of a successful scholar-official, Wang Ji did not completely give up the orientation of *dejunxingdao* while being devoted to an almost life-long pursuit of *jueminxingdao*? I already pointed out how the emperor was the ultimate resource of various powers in monarchy and autocracy. The promotion of any “Way” would be extremely difficult without the endorsement of the emperor. Now, I would further point out that the case of Wang Ji and other scholars in the Yangming school, who had wrestled with the entanglement of the two orientations, actually reveals an unavoidable question that we should carefully consider. The question is: could the role of political subject be played by Confucian scholars and the common people in a society in which the power of the emperor was absolute and reached almost everything and everywhere? As a matter of fact, this question was a dilemma that many scholars in the Yangming school had to face.

#### **IV. The Concept of the “Common People as Political Subjects” Implied in the Yangming School and Its Dilemma**

The key to the orientation of *jueminxingdao* 覺民行道 paved by the Yangming school was the change of the composition of those who could assume the role of political subject, from the combination of Confucian intellectuals and the emperor to that of Confucian intellectuals and the common people. The consequence of this change not only “inspired people to generate a mind of defying the emperor” but, as a logical end, pointed to the issue of the legitimacy of the monarchy itself. Why did the orientation of *jueminxingdao* result in the change of the composition

of the political subject? It was due to the central idea of the Yangming school.

As we know, a well-known teaching of Wang Yangming was, “What learning most values is rooted in your heart-mind (*xin* 心). If your heart-mind thinks it is wrong, even if it is the words of Confucius, you don’t dare to take it as right.”<sup>5</sup> Here, the heart-mind refers to *benxin* 本心 (“original heart-mind”), which is an idea that originated from Mencius. It is equal to *liangzhi* 良知 (“the innate knowledge of the good”), which is the central concept in the Yangming school. The meaning conveyed by this teaching is that, in Wang Yangming’s view, even words from Confucius should not be taken as right if they cannot be acknowledged by our *benxin* or pass the examination of our *liangzhi*. Obviously, this indicates that, for Wang Yangming, the ultimate criterion for judging right or wrong is the *benxin* or *liangzhi* that everybody has, not any outside authority.

If what Confucius said could not be taken as the ultimate criterion of judging right or wrong, good or evil, then what about what the emperor says? According to Wang Yangming, no doubt, what the emperor says should not be taken as the ultimate criterion for judging right or wrong, good or evil. Also, the understanding of this teaching by Wang Yangming should not be limited to the domain of ethics and morality but should be extended to the political and social domains as well. From the perspective of the political and social domains, therefore, this claim by Wang Yangming would logically lead to a challenge to political authority, which, in his time, was nothing but the monarchy and autocracy.

This idea of “following the way rather than the emperor” (從道不從君), was not created by Wang Yangming but is a long-acknowledged value in the Confucian tradition. The significance of Wang Yangming’s teaching was to vividly reveal this value. Historically, there were quite a few scholars such as Gong Sunhong 公孫弘 (200-121BCE) in the Han dynasty who received training in the Confucian classics but distorted Confucian values in order to flatter the emperor and autocracy. But there were also many Confucian intellectuals who embodied the value

---

<sup>5</sup> 夫學貴得於心，求之於心而非也，雖其言出於孔子，不敢以為是也。 English translation by the author.

of “following the way rather than the emperor.” In the Song dynasty, as Professor Yu Ying-shih (2011) pointed out in his book on Zhu Xi, the clear and strong self-awareness of “governing the world together with the emperor” (與君主共治天下) that the Confucian scholar-officials had was a self-conscious reflection of being a political subject. When the Yangming school promoted the orientation of *jueminxingdao* as an alternative to *dejunxingdao* 得君行道, the category of political subject was further enlarged to include the common people. This transformed the composition of those who could take on the role of political subject from Confucian scholar-officials and the emperor to Confucian intellectuals and the common people. In other words, from the perspective of the Yangming school, not only the emperor but also Confucian intellectuals should not exclusively take the responsibility of being the political subject. Every individual including the common people should assume the role of political subject. In my view, this is the most salient feature of the Yangming school observed from the perspective of political orientation. In this sense, in the Yangming school, the role of political subject could be described as the “common people as political subjects.”

Let me illustrate this concept of the “common people as political subjects” by introducing a story about Wang Gen. In almost all of Wang Gen’s biographies, a dream Wang Gen once had was recorded carefully. In the dream, the heavens had fallen and ten thousands of people were running around and crying for help. In that situation, it was Wang Gen who not only raised up the fallen heavens but also rearranged the sun, the moon, and the stars back in order. The traditional interpretation of Wang Gen’s dream is that it reflects the narcissism and big ego lurking deep in Wang Gen’s consciousness. For example, as Hou Wailu 侯外廬 (1903-87) said, “this was a religious mythology of enlightenment, which meant that Wang Gen completely thought of himself as a religious leader.”<sup>6</sup> In addition to this perspective, in my view, the dream reveals precisely the awakening of Wang Gen’s self-awareness of being a subject, not only an ethical and moral subject but also a political and

---

6 这是一种宗教性悟道神话, 完全以教主身份自居. Hou (1959, 961). 故天地間, 惟理與勢為最尊. 雖然, 理又尊之尊也. 廟堂之上言理, 則天子不得以勢相奪. 即相奪焉, 而理則常伸于天下萬世. 《呻吟語》卷一. English translation by the author.



social subject. Only in this sense could Guan Zhidao's observation that Wang Gen and his followers "inspire the people to generate a mind of defying the emperor," be understandable and accurate.

But how should we understand this idea of the "common people as political subjects?" I think there are two points that need to be clarified.

First of all, it was not easy to make a clear distinction between the awareness of apolitical subject and an ethical and moral subject, not only for the common people but also for the scholars in the Yangming school. So, ethical and moral practice was often interwoven with political and social practice.

Secondly, since the two kinds of subject were often entangled with each other, even though the awareness of the "common people as political subjects" would possibly be awakened by *jueminxingdao* as both an idea and a practice, the self-awareness of this subject among the common people could not be very clear. For Confucian intellectuals, even if their self-consciousness could be clearer and stronger than that of the common people, in the actual political realm, which was dominated by the autocracy, when it came to understanding their self-identity as political subjects and how to play their role as political subjects, they were still confronted with a dilemma.

What is this dilemma? Lü Kun 吕坤 (1536-1618), a Confucian scholar-official in the late Ming dynasty, had a frequently quoted saying on *li* 理 (propriety) and *shi* 势 (power), which is helpful when considering the nature of this dilemma. He said,

Only *li* and *shi* are the most honorable things in the world. But *li* is more honorable than *shi*. As long as what you said in the court is based on *li*, the emperor could not deny it with his *shi*. Even though he denied it in the court, the *li* in what you said would be expressed and accepted generation after generation in the world.<sup>7</sup>

Although Lü Kun said that *li* is more honorable than *shi*, he had to acknowledge in the beginning that *shi*, the political power of the

---

<sup>7</sup> 故天地間，惟理與勢為最尊。雖然，理又尊之尊也。廟堂之上言理，則天子不得以勢相奪。即相奪焉，而理則常伸于天下萬世。《呻吟語》卷一。English translation by the author.



emperor, as well as *li*, is also the most honorable thing in the world. Why? The reason is not only because the *shi* represented by the monarchy and autocracy was always an unavoidable reality of the political structure, but also because the denial of *li* by *shi* repeatedly took place throughout Chinese history and particularly during the Ming dynasty. So, for Confucian scholars like Lü Kun, the claim that “the emperor could not deny *li* with his *shi*” was simply an “ought to be” utopia while the *li* represented by Confucian political and social ideals was repeatedly denied by *shi* represented by the dictatorship of the emperor was a “*de facto*” reality. As for the idea that *li* would be expressed and accepted generation after generation in the world, it was nothing but the self-expression of a Confucian scholar’s commitment to his belief. Lü Kun is usually not regarded as a member of the Yangming school, but the dilemma he revealed was specifically focused and highlighted by the possible concept of the “common people as political subjects” implied in the orientation of “*jueminxingdao*,” which was highly promoted by the Yangming school.

Another useful and inspiring framework for observing this dilemma in traditional China was the triad of the emperor (*jun* 君), Confucian intellectuals (*shi* 士), and the common people (*min* 民) made by Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909-95), the most prominent Confucian philosopher in modern China (see Mou 2003). If we consider “the common people as political subjects” from the perspective of the relationship between *jun*, *shi*, and *min*, we can see that, in *dejunxingdao*, the political subject was constituted by the emperor and Confucian intellectuals; in *jueminxingdao*, however, the political subject was constituted by Confucian intellectuals and the common people. The complicating factor, however, is that the evolution of traditional Chinese politics from the Tang dynasty through the Song dynasty to the Ming dynasty, was an increasingly centralized process of monarchy and autocracy. With the transformation from the emperor and Confucian scholar-officials governing the country together to the emperor governing the country as a dictator, it became impossible for the emperor to be a political subject together with Confucian intellectuals and the common people, much less that the political subject would be constituted by Confucian intellectuals and common people without the emperor. Not only was

it impossible to establish the reality of Confucian intellectuals and the common people serving as political subjects without the emperor, even the consciousness of such political subjects—of Confucian intellectuals and the common people without the emperor—would be in conflict with the monarchy and autocracy. As mentioned before, even Confucian scholars such as Guan Zhidao thought this consciousness would “inspire the people to generate a mind of defying the emperor”; one can easily imagine what an emperor, especially a dictator, would think about such a scenario.

In fact, what happened with the scholars of the Yangming school, who on the one hand were devoted to the practice of *jueminxingdao*, yet on the other hand could not totally give up the pursuit of *dejunxingdao*, was exactly a reflection of this trouble and dilemma. Simply put, in practical politics, which was totally dominated by autocracy, Confucian intellectuals represented by those scholars (*shi*) of the Yangming school had to shuttle back and forth between the emperor (*jun*) and the common people (*min*) trying their best to carry out the political and social ideals of Confucianism. This historical phenomenon not only suggests why the political subject of Confucian intellectuals as *shi* could not be truly established but also reveals that the “common people as political subjects” could not be generated but only logically implied in *jueminxingdao* as practiced by Confucian scholars in the Yangming school.

## **V. Why the Confucian Political Subject Could Not Be Established and How to Establish It**

In the last part of this article, let me probe two related questions. First, why is it that neither the subject of the emperor and Confucian intellectuals postulated by *dejunxingdao* 得君行道 nor the subject of the common people possibly developed from *jueminxingdao* 覺民行道 has been truly established in Chinese history?

In my view, the key to answering this question lies in the long monarchy and autocracy that persisted throughout Chinese history. In fact, *jueminxingdao* was an outcome of the failure of *dejunxingdao*.

As we know, with the overthrow of the prime minister system and the enforcement of autocracy in the Ming dynasty, *dejunxingdao* already had become something one might encounter but could not expect. Furthermore, as indicated in my previous analysis, *jueminxindao* could only be promoted on the ethical and moral level. Since the “common people as political subjects” implied in this orientation was seen as a threat to the monarchy and autocracy, it was even more difficult to establish. Historically, it was already difficult for Confucian intellectuals to play a role as political subjects. The miserable fate of the Confucian intellectuals known as the Donglin Party (東林黨) in the late Ming dynasty is a vivid example of the persecution that Confucian scholars were suffering. As for the common people’s awareness of being political subjects, once it began to awaken even slightly and result in some activity, it would have been taken as a sign of instability and swiftly eradicated by the autocracy. The fundamental reason why both *dejunxingdao* and *jueminxingdao* did not work lies in the fact that the autocracy by nature did not allow intellectuals (*shi* 士) nor the common people (*min* 民) to be real political subjects. In short, autocracy by nature is incompatible with the idea and practice of a “government of the people, by the people, for the people.”

Both *dejunxingdao* and *jueminxingdao* aim at the realization of the Confucian political and social ideal. Monarchy and autocracy, however, not only explain why the Confucian political subject could not be established, but they also are essentially in conflict with the Confucian political and social ideal. Whereas monarchy and autocracy advocate *jiatianxia* 家天下 (a family-owned world) or *sitianxia* 私天下 (a privately owned world), Confucianism advocates *gongtianxia* 公天下 (a publicly owned world).

As the Confucian political and social ideal, the idea of the world belonging to the public (*gong tianxia*) is vividly expressed in the “*Datong* 大同” chapter in *Liji* 禮記. In contrast, the idea of the world belonging to a single family (*jia tianxia*) was boldly expressed by Liu Bang 劉邦 (256-195 BCE), the first emperor in Chinese history to hail from a grassroots background. According to historical records, whereas Liu Bang was idle when he was young, his older brother was good at doing business, and so his father sometimes scolded him. But when he took over the

regime and became the emperor, Liu Bang asked his father, “compared with my old brother, whose business is bigger and whose belongings are greater?” (今某之业所就,孰与仲多) (“Annals of Gaozu,” *Record of History*). Obviously, this is a typical example showing that for emperors in Chinese history such as Liu Bang, the empire was their personal property. Another revealing contrast in this regard is a well-known saying from Mencius and the response from Zhu Yuanzhang, one of the most tyrannical dictators in Chinese history. What Mencius said was “people are the most important; the state is next; the sovereign is least” (民為貴,社稷次之,君為輕). Zhu Yuanzhang’s reaction to these words of Mencius was to order his ministers to delete these lines from the text of the *Mencius* and force the removal of Mencius’ memorial tablet from the temple of Confucius.

After monarchy was established in Chinese history, whatever Confucian scholars did to curb the power of the sovereign was unsuccessful. Starting from Confucius, almost all the acknowledged Confucian figures, including Wang Yangming, had the similar experience of being persecuted as *weixue* 偽學, literally “fake learning.” This clearly suggests that the idea of *gong tianxia* advocated by Confucian intellectuals was repeatedly smashed by the reality of *jiatianxia* represented by the monarchy and autocracy. The political failure of Confucius can be seen as the epitome of the failure of the Confucian political and social ideal in history. As the late professor De Bary observed in his *The Trouble with Confucianism*, those Confucian scholars “. . . all too often stood alone in facing the power concentrated in the ruler, or in coping with the Byzantine workings or factional infighting of the imperial bureaucracy. The more conscientious of them could easily become martyrs, or more often political dreamers, but rarely successful statesmen achieving noble goals” (De Bary 1996, 99).

So, as long as the monarchy and autocracy of *jiatianxia* were not abolished, the Confucian political and social ideal of *gongtianxia* could never be realized. Consequently, the identity of political subject for both Confucian intellectuals and the common people could not be established. Now, let me move to the last question, how to solve the dilemma, namely, how to establish the common people as political subjects and to realize the Confucian political and social ideal. In my

view, this is a question with which the Chinese people are still wrestling.

As mentioned, Confucian intellectuals throughout Chinese history have tried their best to curb the monarchy and autocracy but have never found a way to succeed in this effort. For much of history, they did not question the monarchy per se; but this situation changed in the late nineteenth century. As we know, the earliest generation of Confucian intellectuals who visited Europe, such as Wang Tao 王韜 (1828-98), Xue Fucheng 薛福成 (1838-94), and Zheng Guanying 鄭觀應 (1842-1922), all expressed their appreciation of the parliamentary system in their writings. They all believed that this system would be very helpful as a way to realize the Confucian political and social ideal. According to Professor Yu Ying-shih, his teacher, Qian Mu 錢穆 (1895-1990), who was regarded as a conservative in modern China, once highly praised the democracy of the United States when he paid his first and also his last visit to that country in 1960. These examples suggest that democracy is not only compatible with Confucian political and social ideals, but more over is an inner and essential requirement of the latter. Scholars such as De Bary, Yu Ying-shih, and even Hu Shih 胡適 (1891-1962) in earlier times already noticed this point.

Of course, we have to imagine that democracy could guarantee neither the immediate establishment of the common people as political subjects implied in the Yangming school nor the immediate realization of the ideal of *gongtianxia* expected in Confucian tradition. The situation would probably be more chaotic, and more problems would arise in the early stages of the establishment of democracy. The key here, however, is that, without establishing a democratic political system in China, many problems including the dilemma that the Yangming school faced can never be resolved, and the “common people as political subjects” and the ideal of *gongtianxia* can never be realized. It seems the history of China since the revolution of 1911 until the present day has already taught the Chinese people such a lesson.

Last but not least, in my view, democracy has not only its form but also its spirit. As a political framework, democracy might and should have various patterns based on different countries’ own traditions. On the other hand, as an idea and spirit, democracy aims at “a government of the people, by the people, for the people,” which is something

universal and not exclusive to the West.<sup>8</sup> For the various patterns of democracy in the world, this idea and spirit is the same. In my view, in a democratic political system and society, it would be easier for either the common people as political subjects implied in the Yangming school or the political and social ideal of *gongtianxia* consistently advocated in the Confucian tradition to be realized.

In recent years, democracy in the United States has faced unprecedented challenges, but there is no perfect institution in the world. Democracy is not an exception or flawless. What we should do is not to give up democracy and turn back to monarchy and autocracy or pursue an unreal and wholly untested “model” just because we find something wrong with democracy. Until a purely imagined alternative “model” can be proven better than democracy, we should not advocate it as a real possibility; instead, we should work to improve and strengthen democracy. It is my view that any better model that we might develop cannot be created and established without democracy as an existing matrix. Of course, we can “go deeper” in regard to several of the points touched on here. But issues of democracy are not the focus of this article. So, I prefer to leave the possible discussion of these issues open, to be undertaken in another, future article.

---

<sup>8</sup> For example, Amartya Sen has discussed the democracy as both idea and practice in Indian tradition and defined democracy from the perspective of “public reasoning.” See Sen (2006).

## REFERENCES

- Araki, Kengo 荒木見悟. 1979. *Minmatsushūkyō shisō kenkyū: Kan Tōmei no shōgai to sonohiso* 明末宗教思想研究: 管東溟の生涯とその思想 (A Study of Religious Thought in the Late Ming Dynasty: Life and Thought of Guan Zhidao). Tokyo: Sobunsha.
- Brokaw, Cynthia. 1991. *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- De Bary, W. T. 1996. *The Trouble with Confucianism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Guan, Zhidao 管志道. *Shimen Qiuzheng Du* 師門求證贖.
- Hou, Wailu 侯外廬, ed. 1959. Vol. 4 of *Zhongguosixiangtongshi* 中國思想通史 (The General History of Chinese Thought). Beijing: Renmin chubanshe.
- Mou, Zongsan. 2003. *Daode de lixianzhuyi* 道德的理想主義 (The Moral Idealism). Vol. 9 of *Mou Zongsan xiansheng quanji* 牟宗三先生全集 (The Completed Works of Mou Zongsan). Taipei: Linking.
- Peng, Guoxiang. 2001. "The *Zhongjianlu* Written by Wang Ji and Its Significance of Intellectual History." *Chinese Studies* 19 (2): 59-81.
- Sen, Amartya. 2006. *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. London: Picador Books.
- Yu, Ying-shih 余英時. 2004. *Song-Minglixueyuzhengzhiwenhua* 宋明理學與政治文化 (Neo-Confucianism and Political Culture). Taipei: Yunchen.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2011. *Zhu Xi de lishishijie: Songdaishidafuzhengzhiwenhua de yanjiu* 朱熹的歷史世界: 宋代士大夫政治文化的研究 (The Historical World of Zhu Xi: The Political Culture of the Scholar-officials in the Song Dynasty). Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company.

■ Submitted: 14 March 2022

Accepted: 20 July 2022