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The Historical Transformation and Modern Conceptualization of Public and Private Virtues

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Abstract

The persistent prioritization of public virtue over private virtue in modern China demands critical re-examination. From a hermeneutical perspective, the balance between public and private virtues necessitates a recalibration. This recalibration must be grounded in evolving socio-political conditions. The ancient-modern transformation constitutes the fundamental prerequisite for analyzing the status of public and private virtues. Within the classical paradigm, the primacy of private virtue was axiomatic; within the modern framework, the precedence of public virtue is incontrovertible. The modern condition precludes direct extrapolation from private to public virtue. The traditional Confucian methodology of conceptualizing virtue's "public nature" through individual moral cultivation necessitates transition to a modern framework of differentiated public and private virtues, though the social ethical efficacy of private virtue and the political ethical functionality of public virtue must be discretely validated. This phenomenon transcends simple Chinese-Western comparative analysis, demanding comprehension through the lens of historical transformation. The bifurcation of public and private virtues represents a universal human condition rather than a regionally specific experience.

Keywords

ancient-modern transformation – public virtue – private virtue – Confucian ethics

In his recent seminal work “The Bias and Consequences of Prioritizing Public Morality over Private Morality in Modern China,”¹ Chen Lai 陳來 articulates a pivotal orientation issue in China’s contemporary moral development. His discourse, situated within the framework of Chinese-Western comparative analysis and the ancient-modern dialectic, demonstrates his intellectual-historical acumen through methodological historical analysis while manifesting practical concerns through comparative perspectives and contemporary applications. The issues his work addresses merit careful consideration from scholars concerned with both the modern predicament of the Confucian tradition and the concurrent development of moral construction and political evolution in contemporary China.

Drawing inspiration from his scholarship, this study extends Chen’s theoretical trajectory to examine the multifaceted implications of public and private virtues within the broader context of the ancient-modern transformation (*gujin zhi bian* 古今之變). This examination considers their manifestations as problems of intellectual history, ethical transformation, and political transition, aiming to elucidate the differentiation of public and private spheres (*gongsi lingyu* 公私領域), the conceptual parameters of public and private virtues (*gongde side* 公德私德), and the underlying trajectory of China’s modern transformation and moral development paradigm.

1 The Demarcation of Public-Private Spheres and Their Corresponding Virtues

Chen Lai identifies a fundamental predisposition in modern Chinese intellectual discourse toward privileging public virtue (*gongde* 公德) over private virtue (*side* 私德), as evidenced in modern intellectual history and contemporary political developments. He advocates for the revitalization of Confucian ethics (*Rujia lunli* 儒家倫理) to rectify perceived imbalances in China’s modern moral development. His analysis examines the contemporary predicament of Confucian ethics, specifically addressing modern intellectuals’ theoretical privileging of public over private virtue, with the objective of formulating appropriate methodologies for China’s contemporary moral construction.

Through his critical re-examination of significant Chinese and Western philosophical perspectives on public and private virtues, Chen presents a

1 This article was originally published in Chinese. Its English version appears in this volume of *Journal of Chinese Humanities*. Chen Lai 陳來, “Zhongguo jindai yilai zhong gongde qing side de pianxiang yu liubi” 中國近代以來重公德輕私德的偏向與流弊, *Wen shi zhe* 文史哲 no. 1 (2020): 5–23.

bifurcated analytical framework: a static solution derived from established intellectual-historical facts, and a dynamic solution addressing contemporary moral development deficiencies. The static solution constitutes a partial analysis that isolates ethical considerations from external social factors, while the dynamic solution conceptualizes ethics as one component within a broader matrix of interacting social elements. Although Chen navigates between multiple interpretative paradigms, he predominantly emphasizes static and partial solutions, attributing the privileging of public virtue primarily to intellectual discourse. While focusing on the internal equilibrium of public and private virtues within ethical theory itself, he allocates limited attention to modern conditions and socio-historical transformations.

While Chen's analysis proves illuminating in its examination of intellectual perspectives and power configurations in contemporary Chinese moral development, it leaves several critical issues unexamined regarding the contextual framework of Western philosophical thought and the underlying rationale for China's emphasis on public virtue. His discourse demonstrates empirical reliability in documenting specific aspects of ethical intellectual history and political developments, yet reveals methodological limitations in analyzing the dialectical relationship between theoretical discourse and social praxis.

From the perspectives of intellectual and political historiography, three distinct interpretative frameworks emerge for analyzing public-private virtues and their interrelationships: the traditional framework, the modern framework, and the framework that articulates the traditional-modern nexus.

The traditional Chinese interpretative framework encompasses a systematic examination of classical discourse concerning public and private virtues. The traditional conceptualization of public and private virtues exhibits precise definitional parameters. Etymologically, the character *si* 私 (private) is elucidated in the *he* 禾 section of the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字: "It derives from the grain radical with *si* 厶 as the phonetic component. In the northern regions, the owner of grain was designated as the private owner."² In his authoritative commentary, Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735–1815) explicates: "The character for grain inherently contained the meaning of 'private,' and subsequently 私 was borrowed to represent 厶. In Cangjie's system of character creation, 厶 denoted self-interest, while its antithesis became *gong* 公 [public]. Thus, in antiquity, only 厶 was utilized, not 私."³

In the "Wu du" 五蠹 chapter of the *Han Feizi* 韓非子, *si* encompasses the semantic field of "self-enclosing" or "self-circumscribing." Conceptually, *gong*

2 Xu Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注, annot. Duan Yucai 段玉裁, ed. Xu Weixian 許維賢 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2007), 562.

3 Ibid., 562.

公 manifests dual semantic categories. In the “Wu du” chapter, it signifies “opposing self-enclosure,” denoting “opening the circle,” thereby generating the concepts of “common” (*gong* 共) and “interconnection” (*tong* 通). The *Shuowen jiezi* presents it as the antithesis of “*si*, self-enclosing” – defining *gong* as “equitable distribution.” The second semantic category, derived from the *Shijing* 詩經, identifies *gong* 公 as designating spaces for communal labor and ritual activities – such as public palaces (*gonggong* 公宮) and public halls (*gongtang* 公堂) – and the clan leaders who administered these spaces. Subsequently, with the establishment of a unified state, *gong* evolved into a concept intrinsically associated with sovereign authority, bureaucratic administration, and other governing institutions.⁴

Regarding the former understanding of *gong*, the relational definition of public and private has achieved scholarly consensus. As for the latter understanding of *gong*, Mizoguchi Yuzo 溝口雄三 (1932–2010) methodically explicates the traditional Chinese conception of “public” through interpretations from three authoritative sources: Lü Buwei 呂不韋 (292–235 BCE), the “Liyun” 禮運 chapter of the *Liji* 禮記, and Jia Yi 賈誼 (200–168 BCE). Lü Buwei articulates: “When the sage-kings of antiquity governed all-under-Heaven [*tianxia* 天下], they invariably prioritized public-mindedness [*gong* 公]. When public-mindedness prevails, all-under-Heaven achieves tranquility, for such tranquility derives from public-mindedness.”⁵

The “Liyun” chapter presents an even more comprehensive exposition: “When the Great Way prevails, all-under-Heaven belongs to all in common [*tianxia wei gong* 天下為公]; those of virtue and ability are elevated to office; and good faith is cultivated and harmony is fostered.”⁶

Jia Yi articulates a parallel principle: “As ministers of state, one should prioritize the sovereign while transcending self-interest, privilege the state while subordinating familial concerns, and advance public welfare while forsaking private advantage.”⁷

This textual evidence demonstrates that public virtue emerged as a political ideal during the period of sovereign governance (*junzheng* 君政), when sovereign authority functioned in service of the political community. However, following the “ascendancy of imperial governance and decline of sovereign

4 Goukou Xionsan 溝口雄三 [Mizoguchi Yūzō], *Zhongguo de gong yu si: Gongsi* 中國的公與私 • 公私, trans. Zheng Jing 鄭靜, ed. Sun Ge 孫歌 (Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xinzhi sanlian shudian, 2011), 5–6.

5 Lü Buwei 呂不韋, *Lüshi chunqiu jishi* 呂氏春秋集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), 1.24.

6 Zhu Bin 朱彬, *Liji xunzuan* 禮記訓纂 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 9.331.

7 *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 48.2257.

rule,”⁸ this conception of public good was transferred to the imperial institution, whereby the private authority of a single lineage assumed the characteristics of public authority. Subsequently, as the bureaucratic stratum exercised administrative power through self-serving motivations, authentic public-mindedness became increasingly rare. Thus emerged a fundamental bifurcation between self-interest and public-mindedness, with the former serving individual interests and the latter oriented toward collective welfare.⁹

The conceptual triad of public-private, public-private mindedness, and public-private virtues can be analyzed through both behavioral and conceptual paradigms. In terms of behavioral manifestation, when public and private virtues are understood within China’s specific public-private bifurcation, two distinct historical contexts emerge: during the idealized period of sovereign governance, private denoted individual partiality while public signified the deployment of authority for collective welfare; following the establishment of imperial sovereignty, private virtue became associated with the moral conduct of commoners operating outside imperial and bureaucratic spheres, while public virtue became inexorably linked to the moral qualities inherent in sovereign authority and administrative institutions.

From the conceptual perspective, Confucian ethical discourse provided systematic theoretical articulation. This explication developed along dual trajectories: first, the ideal of “all-under-Heaven as common good” established during the sovereign governance period; second, the principle of private interest elimination that emerged during the imperial period as a corrective to self-serving tendencies and power asymmetries. Pre-Qin (before 221 BCE) Confucians elaborated extensively on the former, while Song dynasty (960–1279) Neo-Confucians systematically developed the latter.

The mechanism of benevolent consciousness and governance (*renxin renzheng* 仁心仁政) exemplified the first trajectory through several foundational principles: “the benevolent person loves others” (*renzhe airen* 仁者愛人), “in seeking to establish oneself, establish others; in seeking to advance, advance others,” “broadly benefiting and sustaining the masses” (*boshi ji zhong* 博施濟衆), and “providing security for the elderly, fostering trust among friends, and nurturing the young” (*lao’an shaohuai* 老安少懷). The second trajectory manifests in the dichotomous assertions that “addressing matters according to universal principles constitutes public-mindedness; handling affairs through personal inclination constitutes private interest” and “humanity possesses a

8 Lü Simian 呂思勉, *Zhongguo zhengzhi sixiangshi* 中國政治思想史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2012), 52.

9 Ibid., 56.

single public-private distinction, just as the world maintains a single right-wrong differentiation.”¹⁰

While Chen Lai has explicated these interpretations of the public-private dynamic and their corresponding virtues, his analysis emphasizes ethical implications while according less attention to their political dimensions.

From the perspective of modern moral and political philosophy, this epistemological framework for interpreting public and private virtues necessitates dual analytical orientations. First, the demarcation of public and private virtues maintains an intrinsic connection to the bifurcation of public and private spheres – private virtue cannot exist independent of the private sphere, just as public virtue cannot manifest without the public sphere. Second, the evolution of public and private virtues is inextricably linked to social transformation, with modern social structures constituting the fundamental prerequisite for investigating this moral dichotomy.

Hannah Arendt (1906–1975), drawing upon ancient Greek conceptualizations, articulates the public sphere as a domain of collective visibility characterized by publicity (*gongkaixing* 公開性), while the private sphere encompasses domains of concealment such as the domestic realm. In the modern context, the differentiation and dynamic interaction between public and private spheres constitutes a theoretical principle established within Western moral-political philosophy, as exemplified in the theoretical frameworks of John Locke (1632–1704), John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), and John Rawls (1921–2002), which provide foundational safeguards for public institutions and civil rights.

Within contemporary society, holders of authority within the public-political sphere must maintain consciousness of public virtue and adherence to public moral principles, while private virtue remains circumscribed within the domain of personal life. In the social sphere, public and private virtuous conduct depends upon autonomy (*zizhu* 自主), self-governance (*zizhi* 自治), and self-discipline (*zili* 自律), with state power generally abstaining from direct intervention in private affairs. The tripartite framework of individual, society, and state establishes distinct ethical imperatives for each domain in the modern state. While the private and individual domains demand discrete theoretical treatment, Chen Lai’s analysis of Chinese public and private virtues demonstrates insufficient attention to the ancient-modern transformation, characterized by static and partial interpretative frameworks.

10 Li Jingde 黎靖德, comp., *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類, ed. Wang Xingxian 王星賢 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 13.228.

Chen Lai's presupposed hermeneutical framework prioritizes the traditional-modern nexus, which diverges substantially from an analytical paradigm predicated on the ancient-modern transformation. The relationship between tradition and modernity encompasses multiple configurational modalities – antagonistic opposition, direct transmission, or developmental progression – whereas the ancient-modern transformation paradigm more precisely delineates their epistemological boundaries. This latter framework facilitates systematic analysis of their interconnections while rejecting reductionist claims of unmediated transmission from tradition to modernity, acknowledging that the transition from traditional to modern forms necessitates rigorous verification of adaptive capacity.

Chen's discourse on the relative primacy and equilibrium of public and private virtues becomes methodologically detached from its foundational social prerequisites, potentially suggesting an unproblematic transmission of traditional ethics into modern society. This theoretical position manifests characteristics of sociological "disembedding" (*tuoqian* 脱嵌) and insufficiently addresses the constructive imperatives of contemporary societal and state formation. While his methodological approach demonstrates substantial engagement with modern Western philosophical discourse on public and private virtues, he predominantly adheres to analytical trajectories directly addressing the bifurcation between personal and social morality. This results in insufficient attention to theorists who address the differentiation of public-private virtues within their broader sociopolitical contexts, consequently overlooking the crucial theoretical dimension of how the ancient-modern transformation dialectically relates to the evolution of public-private virtues.

2 Applying Traditional Frameworks to Modern Predispositions

Chen Lai's analysis of modern China's tendency to privilege public virtue over private virtue rests primarily upon two empirical observations: first, that representative modern Chinese intellectuals generally manifest this theoretical orientation; and second, that contemporary Chinese moral development broadly reflects this behavioral predisposition. When examined discretely, both aspects of this characterization demonstrate substantial empirical validity. Regarding the former, Chen presents a sequential analysis and concise critique of perspectives on public and private virtues articulated by Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), Liu Shiwei 劉師培 (1884–1919), Ma Junwu 馬君武 (1881–1940), and Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (1869–1936). Their principal shared perspectives can be synthesized into three fundamental propositions: the

intrinsic interconnection between public and private virtues; the distinction between public and private virtues as separate normative frameworks; and the necessity for modern China to shift emphasis from the private virtue privileged in antiquity toward public virtue.

Several passages from Liang Qichao, which substantially reflect these theorists' convergent perspectives, merit specific reconsideration. Liang posits: "While moral essence remains unitary, its external manifestation establishes the distinction between public and private. Individual cultivation of personal virtue constitutes private virtue; collective cultivation of societal virtue constitutes public virtue. Both are indispensable elements of human existence."¹¹ This formulation provides a foundational conceptualization of public and private virtues while emphasizing their fundamental interconnectedness.

In his examination of the Chinese tradition, Liang observes:

Although China's moral philosophy emerged early, it disproportionately emphasized private virtue, leaving public virtue underdeveloped. An analysis of the canonical texts – the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and related works, which constitute the foundational moral apparatus of our nation and the wellspring of ethical principles – reveals that their didactic content allocates approximately nine-tenths to private virtue, while public virtue comprises less than one-tenth of their teachings.¹²

Through systematic analysis, Liang categorizes the various virtues articulated in seminal Confucian texts, demonstrating that they predominantly fall within the domain of private virtue, fundamentally constituting what he terms "principles for individual moral cultivation." This taxonomic framework, he argues, fails to present the comprehensive moral architecture necessary for a fully developed ethical system that should encompass both public and private virtues. From Liang's analytical perspective, when contextualized within the framework of the modern nation-state, China's demonstrated deficiency in public virtue has exercised a clearly negative influence on modern state-building initiatives. He observes: "The absence of citizens who regard affairs of state as matters of personal concern can be attributed to the fundamental principles of public virtue having never been adequately theorized or explicated."¹³

In marked contrast to traditional Chinese moral frameworks, modern nation-states manifest fundamentally different ethical characteristics. While Britain,

11 Liang Qichao 梁啟超, *Xinmin shuo* 新民說, in *Liang Qichao quanji* 梁啟超全集, ed. Tang Zhijun 湯志鈞 et al. (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2018), 2: 539.

12 Ibid., 2: 539.

13 Ibid., 2: 541.

France, and the United States exhibit distinct constitutional approaches to virtue, they share an underlying philosophical orientation toward what Liang terms “the advancement of collective public welfare.” This orientation, he argues, constitutes the defining attribute of modern moral systems. In elaborating this position, Liang presents a hierarchical taxonomy of moral conduct:

Public virtue thus constitutes the foundational wellspring of all virtues: that which benefits the collective exemplifies good, that which fails to benefit the collective manifests evil, that which provides no benefit while causing harm represents profound evil, and that which neither confers benefit nor inflicts harm constitutes minor evil.¹⁴

In his analysis of moral transformation, Liang emphasizes the inherently dynamic nature of virtue: “Moral virtue is neither immutable nor could the ancients of millennia past have established invariable formulae to regulate all-under-Heaven for ten thousand generations.”¹⁵ In his parallel examination of public virtue and modern morality, Liang systematically delineates multiple conceptual elements as integral components of public virtue: national consciousness, progressive enterprise, rights consciousness, liberty, autonomy, progress, self-respect, social cohesion, economic production and distribution, perseverance, consciousness of duty, and martial virtue.

Within this theoretical framework, Liang articulates a sophisticated analysis of the public implications of private virtue:

The concept of public virtue, when examined in terms of its essential nature, represents the collective moral characteristics manifested within a social body; when analyzed in terms of its constitutive function, it manifests as individual moral qualities emerging from and shaped by the collective’s shared conceptualization of the public good.¹⁶

In this theoretical exposition, Liang manifests no tendency toward diminishing the significance of private virtue; rather, he emphasizes its fundamental importance and its essential role as the foundation for public virtue. The intrinsic interdependence and reciprocal functionality of public and private virtues constitute the central thesis of his argument:

14 Ibid., 2: 541.

15 Ibid., 2: 541.

16 Ibid., 2: 633.

Public virtue represents the extension of private virtue. To comprehend private virtue while failing to grasp public virtue merely indicates an inadequacy in the process of extension; however, to deprecate private virtue while making specious claims to public virtue eliminates the very mechanism through which such extension might occur. Thus, the cultivation of private virtue constitutes the predominant component of moral education.¹⁷

Liang proceeds to articulate a more incisive analysis: "The deterioration of private virtue in contemporary China has reached its apotheosis."¹⁸ He systematically identifies multiple causative factors contributing to this moral crisis: autocratic governance structures, modern hegemonic forces, national instability, economic exigencies, and the deterioration of scholarly institutions. Based on this analytical framework, Liang develops a specialized discourse on private virtue, asserting that while the transformation of national character through new moral paradigms must necessarily draw upon Western ethical innovations, such a transformation can only be achieved through sustained, long-term effort. Consequently, he identifies traditional morality as a crucial resource for maintaining moral order.

Despite Chen Lai's comprehensive exegesis of Liang's perspective on public and private virtues, this study's detailed re-examination of Liang's theoretical framework is necessitated by three critical considerations. First, from a general ethical-philosophical perspective, Liang manifests no inherent predisposition privileging public virtue over private virtue. Second, Liang employs the frameworks of modern society and the nation-state as analytical referents in his examination of the ancient-modern transformation, thereby identifying crucial elements in China's moral development during its transitional period. Consequently, Chen's characterization of Liang as paradigmatic of modern privileging of public virtue appears methodologically unsustainable. Third, other contemporary intellectuals, similarly employing modern transformational frameworks, have identified both China's deficiency in public virtue traditions and the inadequacy of traditional private virtue to support modern public virtue construction. This emphasis on public virtue's functionality emerged directly from the exigencies of social transformation during the late Qing (1616–1911) and Republican periods.

However, Chen's analysis appears circumscribed by an exclusive focus on the relative weighting of public and private virtues within ethical theory,

¹⁷ Ibid., 2: 634.

¹⁸ Ibid., 2: 634.

while inadequately addressing the context of modern transformation. His assertion that intellectual privileging of public virtue constitutes an imbalance requiring correction potentially embodies both ahistorical and antihistorical presuppositions, failing to recognize that the relative emphasis on public and private virtues evolves in accordance with collective societal self-construction. Furthermore, Ma Junwu's critique of Chinese deficiency in private virtue specifically addresses modern conceptualizations of private virtue rather than traditional ethical structures, suggesting that Chen's related critique risks circularity by presupposing the validity of traditional frameworks.

Chen's analysis manifests a fundamental bifurcation between intellectual history and political history, addressing the developmental trajectory of public and private virtue construction across modern and contemporary periods. While modern intellectuals and contemporary political figures exhibit distinctly different ideological orientations and epistemological frameworks – with significant transformations in collective political characteristics – both periods emphasize the primacy of public virtue construction. However, these represent fundamentally different approaches: one constituting theoretical analysis, the other embodying political praxis. Chen's examination fails to adequately delineate these distinct methodological orientations. His conclusion regarding China's privileging of public virtue “since modern times” leads to his prescribed intervention: constructing equilibrium mechanisms between political-social public virtue and individual morality, reinstating moral autonomy, promoting social public virtue, and positioning Confucian ethics as the fundamental corrective.

However, critical examination reveals significant methodological discontinuities between Chen's conclusions and supporting evidence. Approaching his analysis from a Confucian philosophical standpoint, his critique of Republican-era intellectuals lacks sufficient analytical specificity, whereas contemporary evaluation of moral construction necessitates comprehensive theoretical verification. His methodological strategy of employing traditional frameworks to interpret modern phenomena lacks theoretical cogency for several fundamental reasons: contemporary moral construction challenges require solutions within modern contextual frameworks; Confucian ethics require modern reinterpretation; the application of traditional Confucian ethics to address modern imbalances presents substantial theoretical and practical difficulties; the comprehensive preservation of Confucian scholarship proves problematic in modernity; and modern morality possesses its own internal mechanisms – thus rendering the application of ancient solutions to modern issues fundamentally contrary to historical progression.

3 The Problem of Self-Extension in Moral Philosophy

Chen Lai identifies two distinct modalities of connection between public and private virtues within Confucian ethics. The first modality, characteristic of traditional society, employs private virtue as a mechanism for integrating the personal sphere with the public domain and for establishing continuity between private and public virtues. The second modality, predicated on modern theoretical premises, systematically differentiates between private and public spheres and their corresponding virtues, analyzing moral conditions through the framework of public institutions and collective ethical norms.

Within Chen's analytical framework addressing the modern Chinese predisposition toward – and the deleterious consequences of – privileging public over private virtue, these two modes of connection coexist, though their proper differentiation is essential for remedial purposes. The traditional conceptualization of private virtue as a conduit to public virtue proves fundamentally incommensurable with the modern paradigm of discrete public and private virtues. When examining the Confucian ethical system through the contemporary bifurcation of public-private spheres and their corresponding virtues, self-cultivation initially resides within the domain of private virtue, subsequently orienting toward public virtue. However, despite the Confucian “Three Guidelines and Eight Principles” (*sangang bamu* 三綱八目) providing a comprehensive framework that purportedly unifies public and private spheres, the individual progression from self-cultivation through family ordering, state governance, and universal pacification necessitates resolving the fundamental challenge of moral extension. The critical issue lies in ensuring the authentic transmission of virtue while generating positive reciprocal engagement – what might be termed “virtuous resonance.” This process transcends individual agency, resulting in practical implementation difficulties for Confucianism that can only be addressed through exceptional moral exemplars. However, such individuals remain exceedingly rare, creating an essentially irremediable deficit. The progenitors of Confucianism themselves recognized that this mode of moral extension was not designed for ordinary individuals but was specifically conceived for charismatic leadership figures who transcended mundane concerns.

The theoretical framework articulated by Mencius (372–289 BCE) concerning benevolent consciousness and governance exemplifies these intrinsic characteristics. In his epistemological conceptualization of human consciousness, Mencius establishes the foundational goodness of human nature through his theory of universal “commiserative consciousness” (*ceyin zhi xin* 惻隱之心), positing this innate capacity as the fundamental criterion differentiating

humans from non-humans. However, even this inherent moral consciousness – which serves as the ontological demarcation between human and animal nature – manifests substantial practical variations in its phenomenological expression among individuals:

The differentiation between humans and non-humans remains infinitesimal; the common people relinquish it, while the *junzi* 君子 preserves it. Shun comprehended the myriad phenomena and penetrated human relations, embodying benevolence and righteousness rather than deliberately implementing them.¹⁹

While this moral criterion distinguishing human from non-human nature remains ontologically invariable, its preservation manifests a marked dichotomy between common people and the *junzi*. Only paradigmatic sage-rulers exemplified by Shun could effectively employ such moral consciousness in phenomenological perception and political governance. This demonstrates that the transition from private virtue cultivation to public virtue implementation operates within constraints imposed by both moral capacity and institutional authority. As Mencius articulates:

All humans possess hearts incapable of bearing others' suffering. The ancient sage-kings possessed hearts incapable of bearing others' suffering, thereby implementing governance predicated on the impossibility of bearing others' suffering. When one governs all-under-Heaven through such a heart, administration becomes as manageable as manipulating an object within one's palm.²⁰

Although the universality of moral consciousness represents a theoretical affirmation of humanity's capacity for moral nature and ethical conduct, its political implementation remained the exclusive prerogative of rulers wielding sovereign authority. During the period of sovereign governance, this manifested through paradigmatic rulers such as Yao, Shun, and Yu, who maintained experiential communion with their subjects' joys and sufferings. In the subsequent imperial period, this responsibility devolved exclusively upon the emperor. Evidently, the transition from private to public virtue transforms power into the fundamental mechanism for advancing from domestic

19 *Mengzi jizhu* 孟子集注, in *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注, ed. Zhu Xi 朱熹 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 8.293.

20 *Ibid.*, 3.237.

ordering to state governance and universal pacification. This process becomes essentially disconnected from the moral cultivation of non-power-holding individuals. Consequently, individual moral cultivation and public morality bifurcate into distinct trajectories for rulers and common people. When considered purely as formal theoretical precepts, the Three Guidelines and Eight Principles might be interpreted as universally applicable moral standards. However, when contextualized within the political conditions necessary for extension from individual to universal governance, this moral universalism transforms into a specialized ethical framework applicable exclusively to those wielding sovereign authority. This perhaps explains why the *Daxue* 大學 merely posits that “from the Son of Heaven to the common people, all must regard self-cultivation as fundamental”²¹ without asserting the universal applicability of subsequent moral imperatives.

From the perspective of modern ethical retrospection, the cultivation of individual virtue toward moral excellence constitutes a phenomenon within the domain of private virtue, while the extension from self to others (*tuiji jiren* 推己及人) operates within the sphere of sociopolitical public virtue. The foundational principle articulated by Confucius (551–479 BCE) – “what one does not desire for oneself, do not impose upon others”²² – and Mencius’s conceptualization of extending benevolent consciousness to benevolent governance both operate within this theoretical framework. The process of moral extension, however, manifests distinctly in their respective philosophical systems – Confucius presents it through negative formulation, while Mencius develops a positive articulation. This positive mode of extension receives explicit theoretical elaboration: “The benevolent person fundamentally extends from self to others; therefore, what one does not desire, one does not impose upon others, and what one desires, one extends to all-under-Heaven.”²³

This formulation elucidates the methodological pathway, operational mechanism, and teleological consequences of extension: that which one does not desire remains internally circumscribed, while that which one desires necessitates external extension. The phenomenological self-recognition of fundamental relationships – paternal-filial, conjugal – and basic existential conditions such as hunger and cold, when extended to others and universalized to encompass all-under-Heaven, facilitates effective governance of state and realm. Significantly, these principles constitute “neither abstruse theoretical propositions nor difficult practical implementations,” residing within

21 Ibid, 4.

22 Ibid, 132.

23 Fu Xuan 傅玄, “Ren lun” 仁論, in *Fu zi* 傅子 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 1.6–7.

the domain of axiomatic ethics and quotidian praxis. Consequently, individual moral consciousness and its extension functioned as the fundamental guarantor for the construction and implementation of “public” morality in traditional Chinese society. Within this paradigm, the extension from individual self-cultivation to universal pacification appeared achievable through individual moral consciousness alone, without encountering significant epistemological or practical impediments. This theoretical framework effectively precluded any substantive bifurcation between private sphere/private morality and public sphere/public morality, thereby eliminating any conceptual necessity for mechanisms of transcendence between these domains.

The paradigm of moral extension encountered minimal epistemological challenges within pre-modern Chinese political philosophy. During the period of sovereign governance, rulers actualized their theoretical principles through praxis, transforming benevolent consciousness into benevolent governance while implementing policies of universal beneficence and intergenerational welfare. Following the transition to the imperial period, when all-under-Heaven became the patrimony of a single lineage, rulers effectuated the transformation of “their supreme private interest into the supreme public good of all-under-Heaven.” This process manifested such that “initial consciousness of ethical impropriety gradually yielded to complacent acceptance, as they conceptualized All-under-Heaven as an inexhaustible patrimony for transgenerational transmission and perpetual enjoyment.”²⁴ Consequently, the public-private dichotomy collapsed into imperial private interest, with the emperor’s private virtue becoming, through institutional extension, the normative “public” virtue that political constituents were obligated to observe.

The distinction between the sovereign governance period’s public deployment of public authority and the imperial period’s private appropriation of public authority – the former unifying public and private through public principles, the latter subsuming both under private interests – manifested in both cases through one domain’s subsumption of the other. However, these processes exhibited fundamentally different characteristics: the former demonstrated the ethical sublimity of subordinating private to public benefit while elevating individual virtue cultivation into a universal moral paradigm, whereas the latter manifested the privatization of collective interests and the instrumentalization of private virtue as political exemplar. Within the context of analyzing tradition qua tradition, this observation constitutes an empirical phenomenon requiring neither excessive valorization of the sovereign governance period nor

24 Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲, “Yuan jun” 原君, in *Huang Zongxi quanji* 黃宗羲全集, ed. Wu Guang 吳光 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2012), 1: 2.

wholesale condemnation of the imperial era. Contemporary predispositions toward maintaining rigid demarcation between public and private virtues largely derive from an inability to effectively negotiate the tensions inherent in public-private spheres, authorities, and virtues. Recognition of the existential condition of the ancient-modern transformation obviates any imperative to demand that pre-modern frameworks provide ready-made solutions for contemporary public-private dialectics.

The analytical methodologies employed by Chen Lai and Liang Qichao share a fundamental predisposition toward establishing direct correlations between private and public virtues, thereby insufficiently acknowledging the complex conditions necessary for the theoretical derivation of public virtue from private virtue. Contemporary moral philosophy recognizes modern individual morality, social public virtue, and political public virtue as ontologically discrete phenomena operating without necessary logical derivation from one another. The emergence of moral systems in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that transcended mere heteronomous obedience and emphasized individual autonomy constituted a paradigmatic epistemological breakthrough in ethical theory. This conception of autonomy – signifying the individual's capacity for independent comprehension of moral imperatives and corresponding behavioral implementation without reference to external sanctions or rewards – served as the fundamental catalyst for the establishment of modern social moral systems. The autonomous individual, representing a distinctly modern philosophical and social phenomenon absent from traditional societies, renders the concept of “extension” within the classical principle of “extending from self to others” theoretically untenable within contemporary philosophical discourse, as its implementation would fundamentally contradict the foundational principles of modern moral philosophy.

4 The Priority of Public Virtue: a Critical Analysis

Chen Lai's critique of modern China's predisposition toward privileging public virtue over private virtue and its attendant dysfunctions encompasses a broader theoretical agenda: his analysis constitutes not merely a focused critique of modern Chinese moral deviation but rather a comprehensive examination of the deficiencies inherent in modern moral philosophy. This broader scope becomes evident through his analysis of Liang Qichao's conceptualization of public and private virtues, which he demonstrates was fundamentally shaped by the driving forces of modern moral theory.

In his systematic examination of Western moral and political philosophical discourse, Chen initiates his analysis with Aristotle (384–322 BCE), who articulated a fundamental distinction between the virtues of the “good person” and those of the “good citizen.” Aristotle posited that while civic virtue oriented itself toward the requirements of specific political systems, the virtues of moral excellence addressed universal human ethical qualities. He observed that while these two categories of virtue exhibited substantial divergence in existing polities, they demonstrated increasing convergence in the idealized polis. Chen considers this Aristotelian bifurcation particularly salient for contemporary discourse on public and private virtues, arguing that modern society’s privileging of civic virtue at the expense of moral excellence constitutes the fundamental source of contemporary moral crisis.

Chen extends his analysis to examine the moral distinctions articulated by key Western philosophers: David Hume’s (1711–1776) differentiation between duties to others and duties to self, Immanuel Kant’s (1724–1804) dichotomy between self-perfection and others’ happiness, and finally conducting a focused examination of the theoretical frameworks developed by Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill. While Bentham explicitly formulated the concept of “private ethics” as a framework for individual conduct, his contrast between self-regarding and other-regarding actions proves methodologically insufficient for establishing a systematic differentiation between private and public virtues, particularly given that moral conduct frequently transcends a simple public/private categorization.

Mill’s theoretical distinction between individual morality and social morality, grounded in his articulation of the harm principle, attempts to establish definitive boundaries among modern social virtue, political virtue, and individual morality. His framework maintains public virtue through heteronomous regulation while promoting private virtue through the self-regulatory imperative of harm prevention. However, Chen argues that Mill’s bifurcated framework inadequately addresses the complexity of interpersonal moral relations. By contrast, he posits that the Confucian triadic sequence – private-interpersonal-public – offers a more comprehensive theoretical architecture. Consequently, he suggests that modern Chinese conceptualizations of public and private virtue, informed by Western dichotomous frameworks, exhibit theoretical deficiencies resulting from the displacement of the more nuanced virtue discourse inherent in the Confucian tradition.

From this analytical foundation, Chen develops three interconnected theoretical propositions. First, he argues that the philosophical bifurcation of public and private virtues constitutes an artificial reduction of moral complexity,

constraining ethical life within predetermined theoretical parameters and thereby failing to provide adequate guidance for holistic human development. As an alternative, he advocates for theoretical frameworks grounded in character cultivation (*renge xiuyang lun* 人格修養論) or life philosophy (*rensheng zhexue* 人生哲學). Second, he contends that modern China's privileging of public virtue has resulted in the privileging of political civic morality at the expense of social virtue, necessitating a reorientation toward the development of social virtue rather than political virtue. Third, he maintains that while China's moral development should prioritize social virtue, its foundational ethical qualities must derive from personal ethics. He argues that Confucian ethics, through its sophisticated theoretical treatment of both other-regarding and self-regarding relationships, provides more comprehensive philosophical wisdom. Furthermore, Chen suggests that the deficiency in modern public virtue identified by Liang Qichao would find natural resolution through the process of social modernization.

Chen advances his theoretical framework through a critical examination of Li Zehou's 李澤厚 (1930–2021) proposition that harmony transcends justice – a thesis formulated in response to the modern privileging of rights over the good. Chen maintains that this theoretical position requires substantive grounding in Confucian ethical theory for its philosophical legitimacy. Harmony, conceptualized simultaneously as religious-ethical principle, traditional axiological construct, and absolute moral value, manifests as both the embodiment and extension of benevolence. This conception of benevolence encompasses four cardinal virtues: liberty, equality, justice, and harmony – a theoretical framework that transcends purely socio-political theories of justice. Nevertheless, this position should not obviate the autonomous significance of socio-political considerations, wherein systems of justice and institutional arrangements maintain fundamental importance.

While classical harmony operated through the mechanism of family-state homology without requiring justice as its governing principle, modern justice – predicated on equitable interpersonal relations – constitutes both the axiological foundation and institutional principle for socio-political harmony. Within the modern context, harmony necessarily presupposes justice; indeed, justice both temporally and normatively precedes harmony.

From a normative theoretical perspective, public and private virtues constitute complementary dimensions of society's comprehensive moral architecture, with their effective interaction forming the foundation of a robust moral mechanism. Thus, Chen's critique of the privileging of public virtue and his advocacy for private virtue development maintains theoretical coherence. However, for nations engaged in the construction of modern social

and state institutions, the development of public virtue necessarily assumes both precedence and predominance.

This privileging of public virtue derives its theoretical justification from two considerations. First, an analysis of virtue's structure reveals the interconnection of personal, social, and political morality. Within societies characterized by liberty, justice, and constitutional democracy, citizens can maintain harmonious relations and fulfill their respective obligations, while individuals can cultivate moral excellence across diverse social contexts. However, when social order and constitutional mechanisms prove insufficient, individuals encounter significant obstacles to maintaining moral autonomy, thereby underscoring the priority of public virtue. Second, from the perspective of modern social and state structures, following the theoretical differentiation of private and public spheres, these three modalities of morality operate along distinct trajectories while maintaining mutual reinforcement. Public morality, particularly political morality as manifested in public figures who occupy positions of authority, is subject to heightened ethical scrutiny and evaluative priority since these figures' actions directly affect the collective welfare. Moreover, while modern society maintains the inviolability of the private sphere – where private virtue pertains to personal matters protected from external intervention despite public discourse – public virtue receives intensive societal attention, further demonstrating its priority within the contemporary moral framework.

Contemporary China is navigating a critical juncture in the formation of its modern state, characterized by two parallel transformations: the evolution toward a rule-of-law state and the systematic modernization of governance. Within this developmental trajectory, the heightened attention to public virtue reflects substantive societal imperatives. Disregarding the primacy of public virtue construction while exclusively privileging the determinative role of private virtue would not only impede modern socio-political development but also generate structural incongruities in virtue theory, potentially reducing personal morality to mere instrumental and ornamental functions.

The bifurcation of public and private virtues constitutes a moral-taxonomical distinction, while their intersection represents an objective empirical phenomenon – two theoretical approaches serving distinct analytical purposes, wherein the latter's phenomenological description does not invalidate the former's categorical differentiation. The application of public-private virtue distinctions to Confucian ethics derives from formal structural homologies. While traditional ethics incorporated elements analogous to modern public sphere moral principles, the public-private differentiation represents a distinctly modern phenomenon, precluding simplistic categorization of traditional ethics as public morality. The differentiation of public-private spheres

and their corresponding virtues serves essential orienting functions for nations transitioning toward modernity. Consequently, Confucian ethics requires revitalization through contemporary praxis rather than mere scholarly taxonomy.

Chinese discourse frequently transmutes the ancient-modern transformation into Sino-Western cultural antagonism – a theoretical displacement reflecting inadequate practical problem-solving and retreat into purely scholarly discourse. Regarding public and private virtues, comprehending the ancient-modern ethical transformation holds greater theoretical significance than preoccupation with Sino-Western cultural comparisons. Since the modern period, the fundamental problematic of ancient-modern transformation has frequently been obscured by affectively charged Sino-Western comparative discourse, generating disjunction between theoretical frameworks and practical implementation. Reconstructing the coordinates of virtue within modern Chinese discourse holds greater urgency than sterile comparisons between Confucian and Western ethics.

Translated by Jenny Lu