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The Bias and Consequences of Prioritizing Public Morality over Private Morality in Modern China

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Abstract

According to definitions put forward by modern Western scholars, personal morality refers to conduct or qualities that concern only oneself and do not involve others. In ancient China, however, most virtues were not purely individual matters but were closely tied to one's attitudes toward others. As for public morality, traditional Chinese society did possess certain forms of it, but these differed from the public ethics and etiquette as understood in modern social and civic life. Liang Qichao was influenced by Japan's modern emphasis on public morality, but his advocacy for "public morality" focused primarily on civic morality, namely political morality, whereas Japan's approach centered on general social morality. Although civic and social morality can both be understood as "public morality," a stable and mature modern society relies more fundamentally on the latter to maintain order. China's unique modernization trajectory has led to an overemphasis on political-civic morality, overshadowing the conceptual development and societal promotion of social ethics. The core issue lies in how political morality has replaced, marginalized, and even abolished personal morality, while social morality has been similarly neglected. This has disrupted the proper balance between political, social, and private morality. To rethink contemporary moral discourse in China, it is imperative to restore the independence and significance of personal morality, while actively cultivating a culture of social morality.

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Keywords

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1 Re-examining the Public-Private Morality Framework

Social morality generally refers to the behavioral norms expected of individuals in social and public settings. In practice, its prohibitions often align with the mildest forms of legal regulations, often enforceable through informal societal conventions or "soft law." Scholars note that social morality governs interactions among individuals, society, and the natural world – a domain richly discussed in classical Chinese thought, particularly Confucianism. While Confucian ethics "lacks explicit notions of 'citizens' or 'civil society,' it implicitly addresses principles relevant to public coexistence."[1] In fact, "China's historical identity as a 'land of rituals and propriety' [*liyi zhi bang* 禮儀之邦] reflects its longstanding tradition on social morality." For instance, *Guanzi* 管子 articulated the concept of "the four pillars of the state" (*guo zhi si wei* 國之四維) – propriety (*li* 禮), righteousness (*yi* 義), integrity (*lian* 廉), and a sense of shame (*chi* 恥) – which constitute the traditional conception of public morality, and at the very least, represent its application within the realm of social morality.[2]

The term "public morality" (*gongde* 公德) in modern Chinese encompasses at least two distinct dimensions: civic morality, which reflects the political demands imposed by the state on its citizens, and social morality, which pertains to the normative expectations of modern public life. Based on its use in the modern era, public morality in its narrow sense refers exclusively to social morality, while its broader interpretation includes both social and civic morality. It is worth noting, however, political values such as freedom and democracy are not considered to be in the domain of either moral or public virtue. Having these two dimensions nested within public morality has often caused confusion in discussions, making it difficult to clarify what the term actually refers to, and thus limiting its applicability.

Modern Chinese scholars have primarily focused on discussions surrounding public morality, with limited attention paid to the conceptualization of

1 Liao Shenbai 廖申白, "Gongmin lunli yu Rujia lunli" 公民倫理與儒家倫理, *Zhexue yanjiu* 哲學研究, no. 11 (2001): 67–74.

2 Wu Qiantao 吳潛濤, ed., *Lun gonggong lunli yu gongde* 論公共倫理與公德 (Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 2008), 64.

private morality (*side* 私德) or its ethical framework. In my book *Gudai sixiang wenhua de shijie* 古代思想文化的世界, I address this gap by examining virtue narratives from the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE). These narratives, I argue, can be categorized into three groups: the "Four Restraints" (*siwu* 四無), the "Eleven Maxims" (*shiyiyan* 十一言), and the "Two Constants" (*er weichangbu* 二未嘗不). Here, I focus on explicating the first two categories. For instance, the "Zhouyu" 周語 chapter of *Guoyu* 國語 articulates the "Four Restraints" as follows: "standing without imbalance [*li wu bo* 立無跛], a mark of uprightness [*zheng* 正]; gazing without distraction [*shi wu huan* 視無還], a sign of dignity [*duan* 端]; listening without agitation [*ting wu song* 聽無聳], an expression of composure [*cheng* 成]; and speaking without exaggeration [*yan wu yuan* 言無遠], a reflection of prudence [*shen* 慎]."[3] These four virtues are fundamentally personal.

Similarly, virtues such as elegance (*qi* 齊), sagacity (*sheng* 聖), magnanimity (*guang* 廣), depth (*yuan* 淵), clarity (*ming* 明), fairness (*yun* 允), steadfastness (*du* 篤), sincerity (*cheng* 誠), loyalty (*zhong* 忠), solemnity (*su* 肅), reverence (*gong* 共), excellence (*yi* 懿), mercy (*ci* 慈), generosity (*hui* 惠), and harmony (*he* 和) represent what I term "formal virtues" (*xingshixing dexing* 形式性德行), which aim at the general perfection of one's character and temperament, rather than adherence to specific ethical norms. In ancient virtue theory, these were labeled "dispositional virtues" (*xingqing zhi de* 性情之德), distinct from "moral virtues" (*daode zhi de* 道德之德), "ethical virtues" (*lunli zhi de* 倫理之德) and "intellectual virtues" (*lizhi zhi de* 理智之德). The essence of dispositional virtues lies in "virtues pertaining to the self," whereas virtues such as benevolence (*ren* 仁), righteousness, courage (*yong* 勇), humility (*rang* 讓), trustworthiness (*xin* 信), and propriety constitute "moral virtues." Filial piety (*xiaoti* 孝悌), parental care (*ci'ai* 慈愛), and fraternal loyalty (*youzhong* 友忠), meanwhile, belong neither to the personal dimension nor to the moral sphere but instead are categorized as "ethical virtues."[4] Thus, it would be wrong to understand all traditional Chinese morality as a kind of individual morality.

Defining personal morality solely as ethics pertaining to the self is problematic, considering that most foundational personal virtues in ancient China were inherently connected to one's attitudes toward others. What, then, should this type of morality be termed? In contrast to morality required by political

3 Xu Yuangao 徐元誥, *Guoyu jijie* 國語集解, annot. Wang Shumin 王樹民 and Shen Changyun 沈長雲 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002), 89–90.

4 Chen Lai 陳來, *Gudai sixiang wenhua de shijie: Chunqiu shidai de zongjiao, lunli yu shehui sixiang* 古代思想文化的世界—春秋時代的宗教、倫理與社會思想 (Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xinzhi sanlian shudian, 2002), 344.

or social groups, this form of morality belongs more appropriately to the ethical cultivation of a holistically developed individual. In Aristotelian terms, this corresponds to the "virtues of a good person" (*shanren pinde* 善人品德); within Chinese cultural discourse, it is termed "virtues of the exemplary person" (*junzi pinde* 君子品德), encompassing four dimensions: dispositional virtues, moral virtues, ethical virtues, and intellectual virtues. Therefore, while the public-private morality distinction holds certain value, a vast portion of foundational virtues do not actually fit into this framework, exposing the limitations of such a dichotomy.

Does this mean that traditional Chinese practices of self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身) were exclusively personal or private in nature? The answer depends on how private morality is defined. In Confucianism, self-cultivation rarely occurs in isolation from societal life. Virtues like benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom (*zhi* 智) are intrinsically linked to social interactions and interpersonal relations, requiring practice within real-world situations. Thus, it is inaccurate to equate self-cultivation entirely with private morality. As Liang Qichao 梁啓超 (1873–1929) observed, traditional Chinese "private virtues" were not confined to individual morality but also applied to public life. The Eight Tenets of *The Great Learning*, for example, are not discrete moral principles, but rather a series of practical disciplines. Each stage represents a moral practice, not a separate type of virtue. As the text emphasizes, its principles are consistent and do not follow the public-private distinctions. For instance, "governing others" (*zhi ren* 治人) within the framework of "self-cultivation and governance of others" (*xiuji zhiren* 修己治人) is not a "private" endeavor. Due to limited scope of social interactions in that era, the text did not foreground norms for engaging with unfamiliar individuals. Nonetheless, to claim, as Liang Qichao once did, that public morality was entirely absent in traditional China is also inaccurate. In terms of applications, traditional Chinese morals focused less on virtues for ordinary individuals and more on the moral duties of rulers, officials, and scholar-officials. Thus, the virtues of the exemplary person transcend public-private dichotomies, with their application unified in principle yet differentiated in practice. Although civic morality and social morality may be understood collectively as public morality, Western thought, from ancient Greece to modern times, has prioritized the former over the latter.

In reality, the internal order of a stable, mature modern state and society depends most critically on social morality. Yet China's unique modernization trajectory has prioritized revolutionary morality (*geming daode* 革命道德) in its early modern era and shifted towards civic morality following the Reform and Opening-up, while systematically neglecting the conceptualization and promotion of social morality. Over the past century, this has resulted in a profound imbalance: an overemphasis on political morality over social morality.

The urgent task today is to recalibrate this equilibrium, with immediate focus on cultivating social morality, that is, ethical norms governing collective life.

Within the Confucian moral system, virtues that regulate purely individual behavior without implicating others are in the minority. The majority of ethical teachings inherently encompass "potential effects on others." Core virtues such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness all contain aspects of "obligations toward others." It is also worth noting that "duties to the self" and "duties to others" are not considered separate but rather unified in traditional Chinese moral culture. While not all classical virtues explicitly address community welfare, each one, in its own way, contributes to the benefit, cohesion, and governance of the community.

Virtues at the core of Chinese moral traditions are all relational ones oriented toward others. For example, the "five cardinal relationships" (*wulun* 五倫), ruler and subject, father and son, elder brother and younger brother, husband and wife, and friend and friend, all prescribe relational ethics (*guanxi lunli* 關係倫理) rather than morals concerned with the self. The same holds true for filial piety (*xiao* 孝), fraternal duty (*ti* 悌), loyalty, and trustworthiness. Benevolence and righteousness reflect universal ethical imperatives, while filial piety and fraternal duty entail context-specific obligations, none of which pertain solely to the self. Furthermore, some virtues, such as equilibrium (*zhong* 中), may appear individualistic during self-cultivation, but they ultimately serve to realize harmony (*he* 和), which is an ideal inherently embedded in social settings. In a similar vein, sincerity, trustworthiness, respect (*jing* 敬), and reverence (*gong* 恭) are all relational concepts, manifesting their moral significance within interpersonal relationships. Thus, the concept of "private morality" is useful only within a limited scope, as personal virtues remain inextricably tied to social dynamics.

2 Liang Qichao's Theory of Public and Private Morality

Liang Qichao's discourse on public morality emerged as an application of modern Enlightenment ideals to China's political and ethical landscape, in the face of the urgent demands for national transformation and prosperity in early 20th-century China. Shaped by his exposure to Western social thought during his stay in Japan after the Wuxu Reform, Liang's theoretical framework of morality sought to reconcile traditional ethics with the exigencies of modern state-building.[5]

5 It is generally believed that Liang Qichao's concept of the state was directly influenced by Konrad Bornhak and Johann K. Bluntschli. Issues 11 to 31 of *Qingyi bao* 清議報 featured an

In *Xinmin shuo* 新民說, Liang states: "When each person focuses solely on cultivating their own character, it is called private morality; when each person contributes to the well-being of the group, it is called public morality."[6] In other words, public and private morality are two manifestations of a unified moral system. Public morality entails moral obligations governing the relationship between the individual and the community, whereas private morality involves the perfection of one's personal character in isolation from others. Comparatively, the former serves as the antecedent of communal cohesion while the latter constitutes the bedrock of individual integrity. The defining characteristic of public morality is its concern for the collective good. Liang asserts, "A nation cannot be formed by citizens devoid of private morality, nor can it be sustained by individuals who possess only private ethics but lack public morality." Liang further emphasizes their interdependence: "A complete moral system encompasses both public and private morality; they operate side by side without contradiction."[7] This statement serves as a supplement to the idea of private morality being equivalent to "cultivating the self." Liang's advocacy for public morality stems from his nationalist stance during this period and his use of modern Japan as a model for nation-building.[8] From a theoretical perspective, however, Liang's definition of public morality as "the individual's moral obligations toward the community" represents a notable departure from Western moral philosophy.

Liang acknowledges the sophistication of China's private morality, exemplified by Confucian classics like the *Analects* and *Mencius*, which extol virtues such as loyalty, trustworthiness, steadfastness, respect, gentleness (*wen* 溫), kindness (*liang* 良), reverence, frugality (*jian* 儉), and humility. These, he argues, teach individuals cultivation practices like "nurturing one's heart-mind" (*cunxin yangxing* 存心養性), which all aim at enhancing one's private morality. At the same time, he critiques traditional Chinese ethics for its neglect of public morality: "Chinese moral traditions developed remarkably early, yet they placed a disproportionate emphasis on private virtues, leaving public morality

anonymously translated work titled "Deguo Bolunzhili zhu *Guojia lun*" 德國伯倫知理著國家論.

6 Liang Qichao 梁啟超, *Xinmin shuo* 新民說 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2016), 19.

7 Ibid., 20.

8 Xiajian Zhishu 狹間直樹 [Naoki Hazama], "*Xinmin shuo* lüelun" 新民說略論, in *Liang Qichao Mingzhi Riben Xifang: Riben Jingdu daxue renwen kexue yanjiusuo gongtong yanjiu baogao* 梁啟超・明治日本・西方—日本京都大學人文科學研究所共同研究報告 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2001), 75–76.

almost entirely undeveloped."[9] This imbalance, Liang contends, impeded China's transition into a modern nation-state.

In the first section of *Xinmin shuo*, "Lun Xinmin wei jinri Zhongguo diyi jiwu" 論新民為今日中國第一急務, Liang declares, "What is public morality? It is the virtue upon which a society is formed, and a nation is established."[10] He thus emphasizes that public morality serves as the fundamental pillar for the establishment of human societies, especially modern nation-states. It enables the individual and the state to become integrally linked. By framing public morality as the *sine qua non* of statehood, Liang comes close to treating it as a precondition for the very existence of the nation. Yet in reality, social morality matures in tandem with the development of social structures. Modern Chinese thinkers have often preached cultural modernization as a prerequisite for social modernization, a stance that is theoretically unsound. From a practical standpoint, however, disseminating these new concepts undoubtedly contributes to social progress.

Liang Qichao argues that China's prioritization of private morality over public morality had to be rectified to reverse the nation's decline in the modern world. He asserts:

> Let us compare China's traditional ethics with Western modern ethics. The former categorizes relationships into five domains: ruler-subject, parent-child, sibling-sibling, spouse-spouse, and friend-friend; the latter emphasizes familial ethics, social or communal ethics and national ethics. Traditional ethics focus on one person's relationship with another individual … whereas modern ethics prioritize an individual's relationship with a collective.[11]

Liang points out that China's ancient ethics, primarily based on the five cardinal relationships, were overly narrow. While familial ethics (e.g., parent-child, sibling bonds) were well-developed, social ethics were reduced to friendship, and national ethics limited to ruler-subject dynamics. He attributes this imbalance to a cultural overemphasis on private morality at the expense of public morality in the sense that relationships between individuals were prioritized over an individual's obligations towards groups. For Liang, public morality, defined as collective consciousness, along with the individual's ethical duties towards the collective, was the cornerstone of modern statehood.

9 Liang Qichao, *Xinmin shuo*, 19.
10 Ibid., 19.
11 Ibid., 17.

According to Liang, traditional Chinese moral education primarily focused on cultivating private virtues while elements within traditional thought actively discouraged the development of public ethics. This was so ingrained that it became habitual, leaving the people ignorant of public morality and its accompanying obligations. Though ancient China did possess forms of public virtues, Liang argues these were primarily reserved for scholar-officials rather than the common people. While the scholar-official culture undoubtedly influenced the broader society, Liang himself does not fully explore those nuances. His central argument is that citizens must recognize their obligations to the society and the nation, contributing to communal welfare rather than merely enjoying its benefits without assuming responsibility. When defining the core components of public morality in *Xinmin shuo*, Liang highlights concepts such as national consciousness, a spirit of progress, and awareness of rights. Theoretically, however, this framing conflated moral principles with sociopolitical concepts. These concepts generally do not fall under the domain of morality. By labeling such ideas and values as "public morality," Liang creates a certain degree of theoretical ambiguity.

3 Liu Shipei's Ethical Thought

Liu Shipei 劉師培 (1884–1919) posits that, in ethics, "the individual self should be taken as the subject, and the family, society, and state as objects; hence self-cultivation stands foremost in the study of ethics."[12] He further uses the classical text *Yaodian* 堯典 to articulate his point. Within this text, he identifies three ethical dimensions: familial ethics, embodied in the ideal of "creating harmony and unity among clan members"; social ethics, exemplified by the action to "evaluate all officials, and commend those who exhibit virtuous conduct"; and ethics pertaining to the self, articulated through virtues like "upright yet gentle, magnanimous yet dignified, firm without being harsh, and simple without being arrogant." Liu's method of analysis aligns with the modern Western ethical distinction between "duties to oneself" and "duties to others."

In Liu's view, Confucian ethics from the Qin (221–207 BCE) and Han (206 BCE–220 CE) dynasties onwards can be divided into two schools: the Self-Cultivation School and the Mutual-Benefit School. The former:

12 Liu Shipei 劉師培, *Jingxue jiaokeshu Lunli jiaokeshu* 經學教科書 倫理教科書 (Yangzhou: Guangling shushe, 2016), 128.

> holds clarifying one's mind and putting one's nature into practice [*mingxin jianxing* 明心見性] as its core principle, emphasizes correcting one's faults [*gaiguo* 改過] and cultivating vigilance in solitude [*shendu* 慎獨], and advocates upholding righteousness and illuminating the Way [*zhengyi mingdao* 正誼明道] without seeking personal gain or calculating results.[13]

whereas the Mutual-Benefit School:

> centers on benevolence and magnanimity [*renshu* 仁恕], aspired towards the Great Unity [*datong* 大同], and embraces the ethos of regarding all people as siblings and all things as companions [*minbao wuyu* 民胞物與], thereby removing the boundaries between self and others.[14]

Liu postulates that "the Self-Cultivation School addresses ethics of the self, while the Mutual-Benefit School focuses on the ethics applied to others," suggesting that "integrating both schools would enable the study of ethics to progress from knowledge to actual practice."[15]

In the second volume of his textbook *Lunli jiaokeshu* 倫理教科書, devoted to familial ethics and social ethics, Liu argues that ever since antiquity, the Chinese have possessed only private morality without any form of public morality. They regard themselves primarily as members of the family, and aside from filial piety and fraternal duty, they recognize no other moral obligations. Beyond the familial sphere, no obligations are acknowledged. Yet Liu also concedes that there are elements of ancient Chinese ethics not confined to familial boundaries. For instance, *Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳 states, "One should not refuse royal duties on account of family matters," where "royal duties" signifies affairs of the nation. When weighed against the state, the family remains secondary in importance.

In his discussion of the father-son ethical relationship, Liu Shipei adopts a dual perspective. On the one hand, he stresses that parental care and filial piety constitute reciprocal duties between fathers and sons; on the other hand, he criticizes the Confucian view that "all children had to fulfill their duties only to their parents, not to society or the state,"[16] which undermined public morality. Yet Liu acknowledges exceptions even within orthodox texts. For

13 Ibid., 132.
14 Ibid., 132.
15 Ibid., 132.
16 Ibid., 209.

instance, *Xiaojing* 孝經 asserts that "Establish yourself in the world and follow the Way, so that your reputation may endure for future generations, and this is the ultimate goal of filial piety." From this, Liu deduces that "fulfilling ethical responsibilities to the society and the state also constitutes one aspect of filial piety."[17] In his book, he writes: "When comparing the nation with the family, the nation is more important than the family … Thus, the line between the public and the private must be clearly distinguished."[18] In the conclusion of his section on familial ethics, he contends, "The dominance of familial ideology is the reason behind under-development national and social ethics in China."[19]

In Liu's textbook, the nineteenth lesson, "Lun gongsi zhi jie shuo" 論公私之界說, marks the beginning of his discussion on social ethics. Here, Liu posits that familial ethics belong to the realm of private morality, and only social ethics constitute public morality. He argues that wherever a public consciousness is present, public morality will naturally emerge. He cites a Neo-Confucian maxim "regarding the people as siblings and all things as companions" and asks, "Is this not the very essence of social ethics?" lamenting that "in recent times, however, the Chinese people have neglected public morality, and few pay attention to social ethics."[20] This indicates that social ethics indeed exist in Chinese culture, one that pertains to public morality by relating the individual to the collective or the private to the public.

Liu traces the decline of public morality to the evolution of autocratic governance since the Ming (1368–1644)-Qing (1616–1911) period, which corroded communal ethics, and points out that "the scourge of autocracy lies in its dissolution of collective life among the people, which is the primary cause for citizens' disregard of public morality."[21] As a result, the people place little value on public morality, rendering social ethics difficult to practice.

In the twentieth lesson of the same book, "Lun Zhongguo shehui lunli bu fada zhi yuanyin" 論中國社會倫理不發達之原因, Liu reviews "partisan disasters" throughout China's dynasty history and suggests that during the Han, Song (960–1279), and Ming dynasties, the state's interest generally took precedence over private gain, whereas the Jin (265–420) and Tang (618–907) periods saw rampant political factionalism, where self-serving agendas overshadowed

17 Ibid., 209–10.
18 Ibid., 210.
19 Ibid., 237.
20 Ibid., 239.
21 Ibid., 240.

concerns for national welfare. At the close of this lesson, Liu invokes classical texts to critique the erosion of public morality in contemporary China:

> As *Liji* 禮記 states, "When seated alongside others, do not extend your elbows outward." Ancient proverbs likewise admonish: "Do not damage utensils while eating; do not break branches while resting in the shade." These are manifestations of public morality. Yet today, the Chinese people, for trifling reasons, lack even a rudimentary sense of public responsibility. They defile public roads, destroy shared greenery, jostle for seats on boats and carriages, and engage in fraudulent business practices. While seemingly trivial, these acts represent profound deficiencies in the populace's virtue.[22]

Liu further discusses benevolence (*ren'ai* 仁愛), justice (*zhengyi* 正義), harmony (*hemu* 和睦), chivalry (*yixia* 義俠), the selection of friends (*zejiao* 擇交), obedience (*fucong* 服從), sincerity and trustworthiness (*chengxin* 誠信), maintaining one's personal integrity (*jieshen* 潔身), and one's ethical obligations toward teachers, friends, and local communities (*shiyou, xiangdang zhi lunli* 師友、鄉黨之倫理). By categorizing virtues such as benevolence, righteousness, and propriety under social ethics, Liu shows that ancient China was not devoid of social morality and on the contrary contained abundant resources in that regard. At the same time, Liu notes that modern Chinese, in attempting to rectify this deficiency, also seek relevant resources within tradition, such as the ideal of "interconnectedness between self and others" (*renwo xiangtong* 人我相通) and Confucius's vision of the Great Unity, in which "people do not cherish only their own parents, nor care only for their own children." While acknowledging the philosophical depth of these teachings, he argues that abstract moral principles alone are insufficient. Without foundational social reforms, such ethics remain superficial.

4 Ma Junwu on Public Morality

Ma Junwu 馬君武 (1881–1940) published his essay "Lun gongde" 論公德 just a year after Liang Qichao's discourse on public morality in *Xinmin shuo*. It served as both a response to Liang and a critique of traditional Chinese society. He

22 Ibid., 242.

claims, "The so-called private morality of Chinese has been more than sufficient to produce docile, subservient slaves, but inadequate for cultivating lively and enterprising citizens."[23] For Ma, China's so-called private morality was incapable of cultivating modern national virtues.

In distinguishing between public and private morality, Ma seems to contend that national ethics has both private and public dimensions, with the former ideally characterized by vitality and enterprise. He further asserts, "Indeed, private morality is the root of public morality,"[24] which at first appears to echo Liang Qichao's 1903 view on private morality, but their premises diverge significantly. According to Liang, even though the Chinese possessed private morality without much emphasis on public morality, the latter could be developed by extending the former. By contrast, Ma argues that China's lack of public morality does not stem solely from insufficient application of private morality; rather, it arises because private morality itself is under-developed.

What, then, does Ma Junwu mean by "private morality"? In his assessment, traditional Chinese notions of private morality fail to promote a love of honor, rights, and freedom. Consequently, public morality cannot flourish. He concludes, "If one regards mere self-restraint, the avoidance of wrongdoing, self-cultivation, and cultivation of vigilance in solitude as proof of a fully realized private morality, that is merely the private morality of a slave state, not a free nation."[25] This argument appears plausible on the surface, but is in fact misleading. As Liang noted, values like rights and freedom align more closely with public morality, not private virtue. Based on Liang's arguments, China was not entirely devoid of public morality but merely lacked its modern forms. In contrast, Ma claims that China lacked even a foundational modern private morality, necessitating a complete renewal, a moral revolution and transformation.

Could one then argue that private and public morality each have ancient and modern forms? While it is plausible to suggest that there is some continuity between ancient and modern private morality, modern public morality indeed departs significantly from its traditional counterpart. Ma, however, does not draw such a distinction. He instead remarks:

> The citizens of our country in antiquity were, in fact, not devoid of public morality. This is supported by historical accounts, which describe King

23 Ma Junwu 馬君武, "Lun gongde" 論公德, in *Ma Junwu wenxuan* 馬君武文選, ed. Zeng Degui 曾德珪 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2000), 189.

24 Ibid., 189–90.

25 Ibid., 189–90.

> Wen of the Western Zhou 周文王 period as having maintained a hunting ground extending seventy *li* 里 in each direction, yet choosing to joyously share it with the populace. Another record states that during his reign, farmers ceded their field boundaries to each other, travelers stepped aside to allow others to pass, and the elderly were spared the burden of carrying heavy loads on the road.

Ma interprets these as evidence of well-developed public morality in the Western Zhou era (1046–771 BCE), arguing that such ethics gradually declined over time. Yet, Ma's reasoning falters, because his concept of "national public morality" could not have existed under a feudal system where the very notion of a "citizenry" was absent. That said, a form of public morality beyond individual concerns did exist in ancient China. Ma's essay lacks logical precision, and his primary concern does not appear to be political or "slave" morality. Rather, as Chen Ruoshui 陳弱水 suggests, Ma's concern lies primarily in social morality – namely, ethics pertaining to the public sphere and communal life.[26]

5 Zhang Taiyan on Revolutionary Morality

According to Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (1869–1936), the fundamental reason behind the Han Chinese's subjugation under Manchu rule and its prolonged inability to "recover its sovereignty" did not lie in the harms stemming from Song or Han learning, but rather in the decline of morality. Thus, those committed to revolutionary endeavors today must give priority to morality, without which they will fail to rally the nation.[27] For Zhang, beyond the so-called "great virtues" and "public morality," "minor virtues" and "private morality" must not be overlooked. Without moral vigilance, individuals would succumb to opportunism, "giving free rein to their emotions and desires, and ultimately bringing about destruction and decay." In his view, public morality is rooted in private morality. Zhang further argues that morality recognizes no distinction between "great" and "small," or "public" and "private." Emphasizing the functional importance of morality, Zhang asserts that China lacks not strategic acumen but rather moral principles. In his view, an individual who possesses

26 Chen Ruoshuo 陳弱水, *Gongong yishi yu Zhongguo wenhua* 公共意識與中國文化 (Beijing: Xinxing chubanshe, 2006), 110.

27 Zhang Yong 張勇, "'Daode' yu 'geming': *Xinmin wanbao* yu *Minbao* shiqi Liang Rengong yu Zhang Taiyan de 'daode' jiaoshe" "道德" 與 "革命" —《新民晚報》與《民報》時期梁任公與章太炎的 "道德" 交涉, *Zhongguo xueshu* 中國學術 33: 125.

sound private morality will also possess sound public morality. In other words, the strength of a person's public morality is determined by the depth of their private morality.

These views closely resemble Liang Qichao's theory of private morality in "Lun side" 論私德. Another element in Zhang's essay "Geming zhi daode" 革命之道德 that attracted the attention of later scholars is his approach of using occupation as a basis for assessing one's moral virtue. For Zhang, ethical standards vary from profession to profession. He classifies society into sixteen occupational categories: "farmers, laborers, vendors, shopkeepers, scholars, artisans, intellectuals, soldiers, low-level officials, advisors, merchant-officials, capital bureaucrats, provincial officials, military officers, appointed functionaries, and hired translators."[28] Zhang believes that those engaging in farming, labor, and artistic or technical professions generally uphold moral integrity, whereas officials and merchants are prone to moral corruption. His conclusion that greater knowledge correlates with lesser morality and higher rank with deeper moral decay reflects a populist ethos, which resonates in certain ways with the ideologies of the Cultural Revolution era. Nonetheless, Zhang's emphasis on private morality remains central to his ethical philosophy.

6 Xu Teli on Public Morality

In 1950, Xu Teli 徐特立 (1877–1968), a teacher of Mao Zedong 毛澤東 (1893–1976), authored an essay titled "Lun guomin gongde" 論國民公德. As an educator, Xu evidently took it upon himself to elaborate on Mao's concept of "five loves" (*wu'ai* 五愛) regarding public morality. He notes, "Mao Zedong's conception of morality does not emphasize personal private virtue but rather focuses on political relationships."[29] Xu concurs with Mao's understanding, while also stressing the importance of those aspects of private morality that influence political life or public morality.

This view is significant not only because it stresses political meaning in the realm of moral issues, but also because it sheds light on Mao's perspective underpinning the Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), which speaks only of civic morality and does not

28 Zhang Binglin 章炳麟, "Geming zhi daode" 革命之道德, in *Zhang Taiyan zhenglun xuanji* 章太炎政論選集, ed. Tang Zhijun 湯志鈞 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 1: 314–18.

29 Xu Teli 徐特立, "Lun guomin gongde" 論國民公德, in *Xu Teli wenji* 徐特立文集 (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1980), 437.

mention individual private virtue. Indeed, Mao Zedong's stance profoundly influenced the development of moral education in the ensuing decades of the People's Republic of China. Yet Xu Teli's essay does not directly address why the Common Program "establishes public morality for all citizens without stipulating individual private virtue." He merely observes that Mao placed little importance on personal private virtue.

Following this statement, Xu's discussion focuses primarily on the idea that a person's morality is shaped by changes in social development, which seems to imply that private morality will naturally evolve in tandem with societal change. If social reforms are successfully implemented, individual moral character will also improve. He further supports this view through examples of the Great Revolution, the Land Revolution, and the Anti-Japanese National Revolution. In regions where social relations are restructured, measures such as rents and interest reduction and equal land distribution are employed, and broad-based people's democracy is promoted, both social customs and individual morality witnessed unprecedented transformation.[30] Xu's underlying argument is that to discuss personal morality apart from social reform is not only misguided, but even "entirely reactionary."[31]

7 Post-1949 Conceptualizations of Public Morality

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, moral discourse became institutionalized under the leadership of the Party and the state. Accordingly, rather than examining individual interpretations, this section looks to the National Constitution and Party documents to explore understandings of public and private morality in the current era.

The 1954 Constitution mandated that citizens must uphold social morality, including the "five loves," namely love for the motherland, the people, labor, science, and public property. This legally enshrined the "five loves" as principles of national public morality. In practice, however, these belonged to political morality, which was positioned above social morality understood as general public ethics. The 1982 Constitution revised the "five loves" to "love for the motherland, the people, labor, science, and socialism," further politicizing public morality while sidelining advocacy for personal morality. Notably absent were references to Chinese cultural traditions or traditional virtues, demonstrating a trend in which political morality overshadowed social morality.

30 Ibid., 438.
31 Ibid., 438.

Subsequent constitutional amendments retained this emphasis, demonstrating that the constitutional stance on civic morality has remained unchanged despite evolving social realities.

In conclusion, this article, from an ethical and moral philosophical perspective, centers on fundamental personal morality and argues that the paramount issue in modern Chinese moral discourse is the ascendancy of political morality that has replaced, suppressed, and even abolished personal morality, while also neglecting social morality. This imbalance among political, social, and individual morality demands redress. To rethink contemporary moral discourse in China, it is imperative to restore the independence and significance of personal morality, while actively cultivating a culture of social morality.

Translated by Epperly Zhang