

# Xu Fuguan's Methodology for Interpreting Chinese Intellectual History: An Original Innovation or the Impact of Gadamerian Lines of Thought?

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## Abstract

The article examines the research methodology of Chinese intellectual history developed by the Modern Confucian Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 (1904–1982). His novel methodological approach differed significantly from the methodology advocated by Fu Sinian 傅斯年 (1896–1950), the founder of the Institute of History and Philology of Academia Sinica in 1928, who advocated a rigorous adoption of Western scientific methodology in historical research, based exclusively on a philological perspective. Fu Sinian's methodological approach, however, prevailed among Chinese historians in mainland China in the first half of the 20th century and in Taiwan after 1949. Xu Fuguan was highly critical of such an approach, considering it inadequate and inappropriate because it did not allow for conceptual interpretations on the one hand, and disregarded the contextualization and historical development of concepts and meanings on the other. Xu's methodology is based on the application of the hermeneutic circle, which Xu calls dynamic and structural holism from a comparative perspective. In his methodology, *a method of seeking embodied experience* (*zhui tiyan de fangfa* 追體驗的方法) and *intersubjectiveness* (*zhuti jianxing* 主題間性) play a crucial role as they enable actualization of and communication with ancient thinkers in present times. However, Xu's methodological approaches are also strikingly similar to Gadamer's method of the fusion of horizons and Schleiermacher's hermeneutic circle, which begs the question whether his critique of Fu's adoption of Western methods was not based upon hypocritical grounds.

**Keywords:** Xu Fuguan, methodology, dynamic and structural holism, the method of seeking embodied experience, contextualization, hermeneutic circle, fusion of horizons, Gadamer

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## Xu Fuguanova interpretacija kitajske idejne zgodovine: izvirna inovacija ali vpliv Gadamerjeve miselnosti

### Izvleček

Članek obravnava metodologijo raziskovanja kitajske intelektualne zgodovine, ki jo je razvil moderni konfucijanec Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 (1904–1982). Njegov novi metodološki pristop se je bistveno razlikoval od metodologije, ki jo je zagovarjal Fu Sinian 傅斯年 (1896–1950), ustanovitelj Inštituta za zgodovino in filologijo Academia Sinica (ustanovljen leta 1928), ki je temeljila na doslednem prevzemanju zahodne znanstvene metodologije v proučevanju zgodovine, osnovane izključno na filološki perspektivi. Fu Sinianov metodološki pristop je imel izjemen vpliv med kitajskimi zgodovinarji na celinski Kitajski v prvi polovici 20. stoletja in na Tajvanu po letu 1949. Xu Fuguan je bil zelo kritičen do takšnega pristopa, saj je menil, da je neustrezen in neprimeren, ker ni dopuščal konceptualnih razlag na eni strani ter je zanemarjal kontekstualizacijo in zgodovinski razvoj konceptov in pomenov na drugi strani. Xujeva metodologija temelji na uporabi hermenevtičnega kroga, ki ga Xu imenuje dinamični in strukturni holizem s primerjalne perspektive. Metoda iskanja utelešene izkušnje (*zhui ti-yan de fangfa* 追體驗的方法) in intersubjektivnosti (*zhuti jianxing* 主題間性) ima v njegovi metodologiji ključno vlogo, saj omogoča aktualizacijo in komunikacijo s starimi misleci v današnjem času. Xujevi metodološki pristopi so osupljivo podobni Gadamerjevi metodi zlitja horizontov in Schleiermacherjevemu hermenevtičnemu krogu, kar postavlja vprašanje, ali je njegova kritika Fujevega prevzemanja zahodnih metod temeljila na hipokritski osnovi.

**Ključne besede:** Xu Fuguan, metodologija, dinamični in strukturni holizem, metoda iskanja utelešene izkušnje, kontekstualizacija, hermenevtični krog, zlitje horizontov, Gadamer

### Introduction

The modern Confucian Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 (1904–1982) was a historian of the intellectual tradition of pre-Qin China, focusing his studies on its socio-cultural characteristics. He was also an outstanding philologist, political scientist, as well as literary and art critic. Within the framework of the history of the ideational tradition, he naturally studied philosophy extensively, but did not create a philosophical system of his own. He was the only one among the second generation of Modern Confucians to contradict the notion that the renewal of Confucianism required the construction of a new ontology and metaphysics.

However, this renewal of Confucianism was to serve as a basis for preserving cultural tradition and identity in the context of China's modernization in the 20th century, which was significantly influenced by Western intellectual discourses.

Xu's argument against the construction of metaphysics and ontology was based on the view that the pragmatic core of traditional Chinese thought did not lead to

the construction of a coherently structured metaphysical system as developed by the ancient Greeks. According to Xu, the reason for this was that in ancient China the idea of ethics developed directly from mythological society and was based on the divine core of the human being. Therefore, ethics did not have anything to do with metaphysics, let alone religion. According to Xu, ethics and morality, as well as all the central Confucian virtues, developed on the basis of the concept of concerned consciousness (*youhuan yishi* 憂患意識)<sup>1</sup>.

Xu Fuguan extensively studied the socio-political theory of traditional and modern China and advocated the idea that the only solution for China in the modern era was to establish democracy. Only in this way, he argued, could the authoritarian regime that prevailed in China after the Han dynasty (202 BC–220 CE) not only enable Chinese society to participate in a globalized world, but also contribute an ethical system based on democratic values, namely the value of human beings and the protection of their rights, as well as self-cultivation and reflection on the moral self, which derive from the original Confucianism. In this regard, Xu Fuguan put enormous efforts into the historical and textual analysis of the classical Confucian texts to elucidate and promote the democratic core of original Confucianism, and he advocated for its preservation and application in modern China.

In this article, however, we will examine Xu Fuguan's methodology of exploring the Chinese intellectual tradition, which will reveal his supposedly innovative and creative approach to interpreting the historical development and conceptual meaning of Confucian thought. In this context, the present paper is focused upon the question of whether these approaches were not created under direct or indirect impact of the European hermeneutical theories of the time.

## The Problem of Methodology Used in Historical Research in the First Half of the 20th Century

After 1949, Modern Confucians in exile were concerned with the problem of where Chinese culture was going and what would happen to it. For them, Confucianism represented not only the explanatory system to describe the world, but also a program for guiding transformational change in the world (Huang 2018b,

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1 Xu's analysis and interpretation of the concept of concerned consciousness are certainly among his greatest contributions to our understanding of the ancient Chinese ideational history. This also answers the question of why a monotheistic religion was never established in China, even though the means of production and relationships were at such a level that this reversal occurred in other highly developed civilizations during the same historical period. For a detailed analysis and explanation and of this concept see Huang (2018a), and Sernelj (2020).

II /2). They thus sought a solution to the suffering China endured in the 20th century based on Confucian studies. The ideals of Modern Confucians were not limited to striving for the revival and rehabilitation of the ideational tradition from which they had emerged. It was clear to them that the intellectual process of modernizing Confucianism could only begin on the basis of its synthesis with the ideas imported from Euro-American philosophy, since this was the cultural background from which modernization actually emerged. The presupposed acceptance of the Western models of democracy and science, which were supposed to lead China from a backward to a modernized society, therefore led to a new reflection on the role and importance of the Confucian intellectual tradition. The main leitmotif of Modern Confucians was the revival of the traditional Chinese intellectual tradition based on the original Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties, combined with a deeper knowledge of Western philosophical concepts and cultural characteristics. Of course, this process meant the reproduction of a Confucian intellectual system of thought, albeit one based on the reinterpretation and redefinition of Confucian concepts by Western philosophical systems (Chang et al. 2018, 53).

In the process of modernization, the second generation took the position that China needed to preserve and develop important elements of its own traditions, as these contained the seeds of its democratic and scientific development. Unlike most other Chinese intellectual currents of the time, which believed that Confucian ideology was the main obstacle to China's modernization, the second generation was convinced that it was compatible with both science and democracy, and that East Asian societies would not succeed in developing modern democratic social systems unless they embraced and took into account various segments of the Confucian tradition (ibid., 97).

In the 1950s and 1960s, there was a controversy between Modern Confucians working in Taiwan and Hong Kong and the liberal current of Taiwanese intellectuals led by Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) over whether Confucianism and Chinese culture were at all suitable for the development of democracy, science, and technology. This current also advocated complete Westernization and held that there was nothing in Chinese political thought worth studying and adopting in the process of modernization.<sup>2</sup> Modern Confucians, however, held that these elements were not at the forefront of traditional Confucianism, but this did not mean that

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2 Xu Fuguan sharply criticized this liberal current led by Hu Shi and got himself into a lot of trouble. This was probably one of the reasons why he lost his position at Donghai University Taizhong in 1970 (he had been a professor of Chinese literature there since 1955), because Hu Shi, as president of Academia Sinica (from 1957 to 1962), was very influential in political circles even after his death in 1962 (Lee 1998, 130).

it hindered the modernization of Chinese society. Taiwanese liberals took the opposite view, arguing that modernization required an end to the Confucian way of thinking (Rošker 2019, 255).

In an attempt to find a solution to the crisis, they tried to revive Confucianism by either drawing on the thought of Kant and Hegel or seeking the basis of a Confucian renewal of Chinese culture in a reinterpretation of the history of Chinese thought. According to Huang Chun-chieh (2018b, II/4–18), Modern Confucianism from Hong Kong and Taiwan can also be seen as a (new) methodology. Its representatives criticized, on the one hand, the Chinese hermeneutics developed during the reign of Emperors Qianlong 乾隆 (1735–1796) and Jiaqing 嘉慶 (1796–1820), the so-called Qian-Jia School<sup>3</sup> (乾嘉學派), and, on the other hand, the scientism deriving from the adoption of Western knowledge.

Xu Fuguan strongly opposed the textual criticism of the Qing-Jia School and its recourse to philological and phonological methods, the study of language, bibliography, and the compilation of classics. According to Xu, the Qian-Jia School completely neglected the study of human reason, relationships between the individual and others, harmonious coexistence, and the personal practice of what had already been understood through previous study, the themes that prevailed from the early Zhou dynasty to the Qing dynasty. Xu believed that their method contained a realist dimension, but their kind of realism was too exaggerated because it did not take into account the real historical contexts of the texts. Xiong Shili and Qian Mu also rejected the Qian-Jia method, which was prevalent in the adoption of Western scientific methodology (ibid.). In other words, the problem of methodology, or lack thereof, was at the centre of intellectual debate in the first half of the 20th century. He Bingsong 何炳松 (1890–1946), for example, complained in his work *The Methodology of Historical Research*, published in 1927, that although Chinese historians recorded many important things, they did not pay enough attention to the theory and methodology of their research. Therefore, his book was to introduce the methodology of Western historical scholarship (ibid.). A year later, in 1928, Academia Sinica was founded and humanities research, including historiography, entered a new and important phase. Fu Sinian 傅斯年 (1896–1950) who was a follower of Hu Shi' and the founder of the Institute of History and Philology of Academia Sinica, clearly explained the goal of Academia, which was to develop contemporary sciences rather than to promote the so-called traditional disciplines. The goal was to treat the study of history and philology like the natural sciences. This orientation,

3 Also called the school of Han Studies (*Hanxue* 漢學) that interpreted Confucian texts mainly with philological methods (*xungu* 訓詁) and relied exclusively on the originals of the transmitted Confucian Classics that were created during the Han dynasty (see Theobald 2022). Modern Confucians, however, did not consider Han dynasty Confucianism to be part of a true Confucian tradition.

namely the development of contemporary sciences, was closely related to scientism, a current that was prevalent in Chinese thought at the beginning of the first half of the 20th century. Fu Sinian and other researchers began to introduce the German school of historical science, which subsequently led to the study of historical material becoming the main content of historical research at the Institute (ibid.).

Fu argued that modern historiography is precisely the study of historical sources, with the natural sciences providing the necessary tool to put the historical material in order. Fu Sinian's goal was to explain questions about the history of thought using a philological perspective, since philosophy is a by-product of language (an argument adopted from the West). Fu Sinian's approach to historiographical research also gained acceptance among historians in Taiwan after 1949, and was very influential. This positivist approach to historical research, adopted from the German school, was strongly advocated by Fu. He rejected metaphysics and excluded all interpretations of history outside historiographical research. For him, the basis of historiography was the description of empirical facts rather than the interpretation of the meaning of historical facts, i.e., he rigorously distinguished between "subjective philosophy and moral values" and the "objective study of historical material" (ibid., 20).

Xu Fuguan strongly opposed and criticized Fu's approach. He argued that such a method of textual criticism in studying the history of thought is unable to capture its dynamic process of development (ibid.). In the first chapter of his book *The History of Chinese Philosophy of Human Nature (Zhongguo renxing lunshi 中國人性論史)* published in 1969, where he presents his methodological approach to the study of intellectual history, he stated:

In recent decades, some Chinese scholars working in the field of intellectual history have advocated the adoption of the "philological perspective as a method for explaining intellectual history issues". The basis for this philological perspective is a biased theory advocated by a handful of Western scholars who consider "philosophy as a by-product of language". Chinese scholars associated this philological perspective with the marginal current of thought, the Qian-Jia School. Those who use this kind of method often analyse the essential vocabulary of the history of thought and, following the procedures of ancient commentaries, try to find out its original form and pronunciation, and believe they have found its original meaning. They use the original meaning thus found to explain the content of certain historical currents of thought. Since Fu Sinian held a dominant position in this field of research in this era, his work *The Study of Ancient Teachings on Nature and Destiny* can be regarded as a representative work of this school. But in examining the semantic content of vocabulary, he not only neglects

the fact that the original meaning of a term changes between its initial use and the emergence of a particular current of thought using the term, but he also ignores the fact that within a given epoch the same vocabulary term often has different connotations within different currents of thought. Moreover, and this is particularly important, this method neglects a fundamental idea of philology itself: The original meaning of a term, namely at the time of its creation, does not include all its contemporary meanings at a later time, and may even ignore some important ones.<sup>4</sup> (Xu 1969, I/1-2)

For Xu, the error of Fu's method of applying a philological perspective is that he ignores the development of concepts. Therefore, he developed his own methodology of dynamic holism, which places concepts in the holistic context of historical development. In this way, one cannot extract the concepts or the meanings of characters from the system of thought of the thinkers or from the atmosphere of the epoch and return to their original meaning by making an isolated statistical analysis. In analysing and interpreting the history of the Chinese ideational tradition, he introduced an allegedly new methodology based on a consistent consideration of the hermeneutic circle, and he himself called his methodology dynamic and structural holism (*ibid.*, 22).

### Xu Fuguan's Methodology of Dynamic and Structural Holism

The two fundamental dimensions of Xu's methodology are his holistic approach and a comparative perspective.

The essential meaning of Xu's holism is to understand the whole and its parts in their concrete historical contexts. In his research on intellectual history, Xu reflects on the significance of historical concepts by emphasizing the concreteness of their historical context as a whole and also the specifics of that context (Huang 2018b, II / 14). The interaction between a whole and its parts is a methodological principle

4 幾十年來，中國有些治思想史的人，主張採用（以語言學的觀點，解釋一個思想史的問題的方法）。其根據係來自西方少數人以為（哲學乃語言之副產品）的一偏之輪，以於我國乾嘉學派末流相結托。關於哲學於語言的關係，亦即是思想於語言的關係，乃是互相制約，互相影響的關係，這裡不進一步去涉入到此一問題。我現在所要指出的是，採用這種方法的人，常常是把思想史中的重要詞彙，順著訓詁途徑，找出它的原形原音，以得出它的原始意義；再由這種原始意義去解釋歷史中某一思想的內容。傅斯年的姓名古訓辯證，因為他當時在學派界中所佔的權力性的地位，正可以作為這一排的典範著作。但夷考其實，這不僅忽略了由原義到某一思想成立時，其內容已有時間的發展演變；更忽略了同一個名詞，在同一個時代，也常由不同的思想而賦於以不同的內容。尤其重要的，此一方法，忽略了語言學本身的一頓重大事實，即是語原的本身，也並不能表示它當時所應包含的全部意義，乃至重要意義。

that Xu uses to understand different currents of thought in ancient China. When he examined literature and thought, he placed them in the socio-political and economic context of each era, and conversely, when he examined the socio-political and economic structure of a particular era, he examined it through literature and thought. He defined this approach as a dynamic methodology and a comparative perspective, and the comparative perspective is also called structural holism (ibid., 15). His holistic methodology thus consists of dynamic and structural holism, with dynamic holism characterized by constant change and development.

Xu's structural holism is based on the idea that a structural unit is an entity composed of parts of classical texts, a system of thought, and reality. Xu believes that the interpretation and criticism of texts are not sufficient to understand ancient Chinese thought. Therefore, it is necessary to apply the method of structural unity in the study, which, as we shall see, corresponds to Schleiermacher's method of the hermeneutic circle, although Xu does not refer to him directly. As mentioned above, Xu opposed the textual criticism and exegesis of the Qian-Jia method and held, according to Huang (ibid., 25), that the researcher must use the circular movement of the hermeneutic circle, which connects the parts and the whole, in order to penetrate into the universe of thought of people who lived in the past. In his work *Collected Writings on Chinese Intellectual History* (*Zhongguo sixiangshi lunji* 中國思想史論集), Xu explains in detail his method of structural holism:

The phrase is composed of words, and therefore, to understand the meaning of the phrase, one must understand each of its words. The chapter is composed of phrases, and therefore, to understand the meaning of the chapter, one must understand each of its phrases. The book is composed of chapters, and so to understand the whole book, one must understand meaning of each chapter. This is the way the Ancient's books are to be read. The process is similar with the accumulation that starts with a part and progressively gathers the comprehension of the whole. At the stage of commencing, one can use the studies that Qing literati called exegesis and textual criticism. However, one must be aware that it is impossible to understand the whole without knowing its parts, that is to say phrases. This kind of comprehension is only a minimal one. In order to develop it to a greater extent, it is necessary to return and determine the meaning of each phrase, which constitutes a part, and its movement must start from the totality that is the text. In this way, the meaning of a word is determined from the phrase this word is part of, the meaning of a phrase from the chapter this phrase is part of, the meaning of a chapter from the book this chapter is part of, and the meaning of a book from the whole



thought of the author. This is the work of determining the parts form the text as a whole. This is what Zhao Qi 趙崎 (108–201) called the endeavour “to go deep into the author’s thought, so to understand the author’s texts” (*Mengzi tici*, General Preface of Commentaries on Mencius). This is the necessary second stage of the study, and one cannot reach it solely by means of accomplishing the study of exegesis and textual criticism developed by Qing literati. (Xu in Huang 2018b, II/26)

His method of analysing the history of ideas can be summarized in two points (*ibid.*):

- (a) Every system of thought is a structural and holistic network of meanings, constructed in such a way that it derives from individual parts of meanings and passes from them to the whole.
- (b) Since the system of thought is a network of meanings shared by the researcher and the object under study, a dialogical connection is established between them that creates a mutual or intersubjective relationship.

This second point is also what Xu calls the “method of seeking embodied experience” (*zhui tiyan de fangfa* 追體驗的方法), which he believes should be mastered by all who research the history of the ideational tradition, since it is possible to contact the spiritual (intellectual) cosmos of the pre-Qin thinkers and the past from afar (i.e., the present).

According to Xu, researchers who study the history of the ideational tradition must start with a concrete thing, i.e., a written work, and then move to the abstract level, i.e., thinking or reflecting on that work. At the same time, we should also start with the abstraction of thought and move to the concrete reality of human life and its time. When we go through all these stages, the author of the work and the work can reappear in ourselves and the time we live in. According to Xu, this means that we not only study classical works, but also have in mind a dialogue with the authors of these. Thus, for the researchers of the Chinese ideational tradition, the thought system of the pre-Qin thinkers has no objective existence, but there must be an intersubjective (*zhuti jianxing* 主題間性) connection between them. At the same time, the deeper one penetrates into the intersubjective system of meaning, the more one can put oneself into the thinking of the authors of the classical works one is studying, thus thoroughly expanding one’s own horizons.

The second dimension of Xu’s structural holism deals with the question of human thought and reality. Xu holds that there exists a continuous interaction between human thought and reality that forms a holistic structure in which the two elements are inseparable. This is explained in more detail in the following quote:

The genesis of a person's thinking is often influenced by four main factors. The first one is the person's temperament; the second is the school of thought to which the person belongs as well as the depth of the person's work; the third is the context of his or her epoch; and the fourth is the person's life. The influence of these four important factors is different in each thinker, for some is considerable, for others minimal. At the same time, there is also a reciprocal influence between these four essential elements, therefore one cannot determine an author's thinking from a single, isolated element. (Xu in Huang 2018b, II/28)

His point was to emphasize that the study of the history of ideas must always take into account the socioeconomic and political context in which thinkers lived. According to Xu, the history of a person is a painful record of the struggle between reality and that person's thoughts or ideas, while for Tang Junyi and Mou Zongsan, for example, history is actually the process of the continuous Way of Heaven (*tian dao*). While Xu Fuguan treats a person as a subject struggling according to or against historical processes, Tang and Mou see a person as a transcendent being. This shows the essential difference between Tang's and Mou's tendency to construct a moral metaphysics, while Xu's tendency is just the opposite (*ibid.*, 30). Xu Fuguan's method of studying thought is to "discuss ideas through socio-political history".

### Comparative Perspective

Because Xu conceives of thought and social reality as two interconnected dimensions of his structural holism, he is able to present original ideas and commentary on different orientations of thought in a very concrete way. According to Xu, only from a comparative perspective is it possible to truly grasp the reasons for the existence of a particular school of thought. He uses the latter because he pays much attention to the specific character of the history of the ideational tradition. He thus believes that the study of Chinese culture and thought must start precisely from its specificity, for only in this way can its essence be clearly revealed.

According to Xu, the peculiarity of Chinese culture and thought and its difference from Western culture lies in the fusion of the subjective and the objective, the individual and the community, which prevails in the Chinese tradition of ideas. In Chinese culture, a person's self-cultivation and the cultivation of the external world form a unity and are not two separate things. Only on the basis of a real understanding of the peculiarities of Chinese concepts of ideas, which, according to Xu, are always a product of the socio-political factors of a

particular time and constantly change throughout history, can researchers of the history of ideas take the next step and compare the Chinese tradition of ideas with the Western one (*ibid.*, 32).

In Xu's holistic methodology, the individual research questions are considered as a whole or interconnected. Accordingly, concepts are best understood by examining them in their space-time context. According to Huang, his interpretive method, which he applies to the analysis and interpretation of Chinese classics, can also be called the interpretive method of contextualization.

This method consists of two procedures. In the first, he places Confucian thought in a historical context to examine its interaction with the society of the time. In the second procedure, he analyses Confucian thought by situating it in the present and, through this interpretation, gives new meaning to the classical works. With these two methodological approaches, Xu's analysis of Confucian classics, Confucian commentaries, and Confucians themselves does not separate them from the actual reality in which they lived and worked.

In Xu's works, we find two premises that he states as the basis for his position. According to Xu, a person is a historical being. He also points out that the Chinese way of thinking is characterized by a tendency to turn to reality. A person is endowed with historicity and his existence is neither abstract nor universal. In his articles, Xu supports Sima Qian's understanding of the complexity, multidimensionality, and historical character of a person, and believes that one is not someone who lives outside the world, but a being who actively participates in reality and its productive activities. For Xu, the individual lives in specific and concrete historical circumstances, so that one's existence is influenced by historical experience and reality. Since a person is a historical being, it is necessary to understand his mentality within the discourses of the time in which he lives. It is thus necessary to analyse the ideas of the individual by placing them in the context of his time. As such, Xu emphasizes that the thinking developed by the thinkers of the pre-Qin period, whose common interest was human life, can be adapted to the requirements of modern society. In his view, the historian of ideas must understand the ideas of the thinker they are researching as a product of the social circumstances in which the thinker lived, and then evaluate the influence of his or her thinking on later history, when the ideas had already become a system of thought.

The second level of Xu's methodology is to review and further evaluate Confucianism by placing it in the context of the 20th century. The focus here is on Xu's critique of the study of the political problems of Confucianism and the reasons for 2,000 years of autocracy in China. He thus views despotism as a central feature of the political tradition in Chinese culture. The despotic system, established only

after the pre-Qin period, supplanted the democratic beginnings of the original Confucianism. In this context, Xu developed his thesis of the “double subject”, according to which the people were always considered the active political subject in the ideological tradition of ancient China, but the ruler was always the exclusive subject in concrete social reality (Rošker 2013, 86). For Xu, therefore, the conflict between these two dimensions can only be resolved by creating a democracy based on such democratic elements that are already present in the original Confucianism.

According to Huang Chun-chieh (2018a, 235), Xu's interpretation of original Confucianism represents a typical example of hermeneutic analysis, which can be understood as a method of political science and belongs to the classical Chinese hermeneutic tradition. The foundations of this tradition are neither ontological nor epistemological, but political-economic and socio-political, because this method is not about the study of abstract concepts, but about the history of thought in relation to socio-political history.<sup>5</sup> It cannot be limited to the nominal world, for it intervenes intensively in the phenomenal world of experience, thus combining intellectual with practical activities. This kind of interpretive tradition is able to generate its own internal dynamics by establishing a strong creative interaction between the interpreter and the classics that form the content of the interpretation. Xu's method of interpretation thus belongs to the field of political sociology and economics. For Xu, human beings are political and social beings involved in the activities of daily life. His methodology involves the study of essence and practice, that is, concept and reality.

Xu's greatest contribution to Confucian thought was his rediscovery of the original Confucianism's political idea of “the people as political agents”, including his hermeneutic method, which he related to democracy and whose establishment he saw as crucial for modern China. In doing so, he assumed that all the pre-Qin Confucian philosophers lived in a period of warring states, which is considered a time of pluralistic political regimes and in which autocratic rule had not yet emerged. For this reason, the people are at the centre of politics in their works. However, as mentioned above, the political concept of “the people as the base” (*minben* 民本) gradually died out from the Qin and Han dynasties and did not

5 Huang emphasizes that such socio-political aspects were particularly important in the transmission of Chinese Confucian traditions to other parts of East Asia. According to Marko Ogrizek, these elements were especially important in creating a unified methodology of East Asian Confucianism because they allowed us to see their commonalities that outweigh their mutual differences: “While the methods of East Asian Confucianisms are different in their aims and scope, they also share common sensibilities” (Ogrizek 2020, 91). Therefore, it is by no means coincidental that these aspects also had a decisive influence on the spread and development of Confucianism in Korea (Rošker 2014, 115).

develop further due to the repressive central power. Xu's methodical approach of interpreting the political ideas of original Confucianism formed the axis for the restoration of Confucianism in the 20th century.

In this context, it is important to note Xu Fuguan's argument that Confucian theory is inseparable from democracy, as classical Chinese texts, such as the *Book of Documents* (*Shu jing* 書經), already record that the people are the foundation (*minben* 民本) of the state as well as an important and active subject in building a just and harmonious society (Sernelj 2019, 5). Although these records are vague, Confucius adopted this idea and Mencius then elaborated on it by explicitly stating that the people are the most important element in a state and the ruler the least important (Mengzi, *Jin xin xia*). On the other hand, Xu points out that in autocratic Chinese history, such supposedly democratic elements could not be realized in practice and therefore the idea of the subject as a political actor could not develop (*ibid.*). He also claimed that the realization of Confucian "democratic" ideas failed in practice because there was no legal system in autocratic society that could protect the rights of the people as well as regulate and judge the actions of rulers (*ibid.*). As for the development of science, Xu claimed that although Confucianism did not contain a scientific dimension, it did not suppress or reject science as such. He claimed that the Chinese tradition did not develop a methodology suitable for the development of scientific research because such an approach would be naive. Instead, it developed a methodology based on the cultivation of personality (Rošker 2013, 104).

### Similarities with Gadamer's Fusion of Horizons and Xu's Specific Contribution

Xu's methodology of structural holism, based on strict consideration of historical, socio-political, economic, and subjective factors, the method of seeking the embodied experience (*zhui tiyan*), and the intersubjective approach, seems to resemble Gadamer's concept of horizon fusion. Gadamer claims that the horizon of the present depends on the past, i.e., text, tradition, history, which *per se* implies prejudices or presuppositions. The "historical horizons" are inevitable for the development of the horizon of the present. Therefore, "understanding" emerges from the "fusions of these horizons":

In fact, the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in

understanding the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves. We are familiar with the power of this kind of fusion chiefly from earlier times and their naïveté about themselves and their heritage. In a tradition this process of fusion is continually going on, for there old and new are always combining into something of living value, without either being explicitly foregrounded from the other. (Gadamer 1975, 305)

In Xu's explanations, however, the emphasis is on the actualization of the ancient thinkers and the texts that, on the one hand, cannot be seen in isolation from the present, and, on the other hand, on the fact that the issues they dealt with in their thought can always resonate with the reality of the present, because they deal with the problems related to the conditions of being human. The other important content of Xu's new methodology is the emphasis on the non-objective approach to the study of the history of thought. While Gadamer was preoccupied with his desire to bridge the strict Cartesian separation of the subject and object of comprehension (see Gadamer 1975, 37ff)—and therefore turns away from the products, and rather towards the "orientation" of the subject (*ibid.*, 188)—he is still unable to resolve the question of the two anti-poles of the cognitive process, and he ultimately acknowledges that "we are given no vantage point that would allow us to see these limits and conditions in themselves or to see ourselves 'from the outside' as limited and conditioned in this way" (*ibid.*, 83).

But according to Xu Fuguan, one can understand the content of a work most deeply in a structural, holistic way, i.e. by not objectifying the text and the thinker, that is, by seeking embodied experience and developing an intersubjective relationship. In this sense, the result of this approach offers the readers not only a true understanding of the text, but also an expansion of knowledge and understanding of themselves as a result of constant self-cultivation (elimination of prejudices and judgments based on them) and introspection, as well as a true understanding of the socio-cultural and political conditions of the reality in which they live.

On the first glance Xu's alleged innovation is therefore very similar to Gadamer's ideas of the fusion of horizons. In this light, Xu Fuguan's critique of Fu Sinian's "Western-centric" approach seems more than exaggerated, if not a bit hypocritical. While it is obvious that Xu Fuguan's dynamic and structural holism is fully consistent with Schleiermacher's hermeneutic circle, it is not clear whether Xu Fuguan was also familiar with Gadamer's concepts of fusion and horizons, since

he does not refer to them in his work. Therefore, the answer to the question of whether Xu's methodology is innovative and unique and developed without reference to Western methodology remains unanswered, and we can only speculate about it. However, if we look at his hermeneutic method from the perspective of Chinese intellectual history, it is easy to see that it implies a special inherent value for the development of Sino-foreign discourse because it opens up a new, previously hidden dimension of traditional Chinese thought.

Indeed, by applying his own hermeneutic method and structural holism, Xu Fuguan has shown that from the very beginning of the Chinese ideational tradition there has been a tendency toward a dynamic interrelation among human beings, society, and reality, which mutually influence and depend on each other through socio-historical processes. This reveals the fundamental character of Chinese philosophy, reflected in its holistic onto-epistemological and axiological nature.

## Conclusion

As for the history of the ideational tradition and its political theories, Xu is highly regarded among Modern Confucians precisely because of his emphasis on the original Confucian concept of “the people as the basis of politics”, the dynamic spirit of Confucianism, and the concept of concerned consciousness, which became the centre of debate in the 20th century precisely because of Xu's hermeneutic analysis and interpretations. Although at first look these political aspects seem not to have much to do with Xu's method of interpretation, the above analysis has shown that in fact his hermeneutics stands at the root of his political philosophy, because they are both inseparably connected through a common paradigm which underlies traditional Chinese philosophy, which manifests itself in the relational nature of natural and social reality. Just as a ruler in this view cannot be separated from his people, the rich world of human interiority is tightly connected to the past and present of the society of which people are always part. This paradigm, which allows for the fusion of all these horizons, is precisely the paradigm of structural holism applied in Xu's hermeneutic work. The comparative aspect in which this paradigm is manifested enables us to establish a relativist and contrastive view of all the manifold aspects that constitute reality and can be transmitted from the authors to their readers.

Therefore, both of the principles emphasized by Xu Fuguan in this regard are not only important for a better understanding of Chinese ideational and intellectual history, but also offer an alternative to Western hermeneutical methods that still seem to remain trapped in an essential and isolating view of horizons, which always pertain to the separate realms of human subjectivity and the objective world.

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