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Friendship and sovereignty in He Xinyin (1517-1579): A 16th century politics of friendship

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Abstract

This paper seeks to understand He Xinyin's reassessment of the notion of friendship and its subversive dimension in several of his major essays. This reassessment was part of an increase in discourses on friendship in China in the 16th-17th centuries, which was in some ways prompted by the decay of traditional structures, particularly the family structure, that served as the basis for the social functioning of the empire. He Xinyin was one of the most innovative and radical thinkers whose redefinition allowed friendship to take, for the first time, a foremost place among the five social relations, to be conceived as a subjective relationship where the individual emerges as a primary entity, and to form the ground of two major freedoms, the freedom of expression and the freedom of association.

Keywords: Ming Dynasty; He Xinyin; Friendship; Sovereignty; Freedom of speech

In 1579, Confucian thinker He Xinyin (何心隱 1517-1579) dies in the jails of Wuchang, nowadays a district of the city of Wuhan. He had been held accountable by imperial orthodoxy of all sort of vices: nefarious teaching based on an erroneous interpretation of the Master's words, seduction and corruption of youth, plots of potentially seditious associations akin to peasant's and millenarian revolts that had shaken the imperial power since the end of the 2nd century AD.

In an essay on He, Li Zhi 李贄 (1527-1602), the '*maudit* philosopher' forced to commit suicide for his iconoclasm and a follower of a spontaneism aiming at a radical social emancipation, recounts and dismisses the three criticisms that were levelled at He:

There are five types of human relationships, and He Xinyin broke with four of them to live his life among friends, teachers, and other worthy people; his behavior was exaggerated, perverse, and cannot be taken as an example. It is the way of the pliant snake to know how to flatter one's superiors and intimidate

one's inferiors¹, but He Xinyin displayed nothing but bold words and bold behavior², which piled up blame and trouble for him. He may have been learned, but not in the art of self-preservation. And anyway, the Way is rooted in human nature and the main thing in study is to make it approachable. Judging people by one's own overly strict standards will only drive them away; haranguing the ambitious will only cause those on top to be uneasy; 'using one's wealth to make friends' only brings out the greed and competitiveness in people. His own choices led him to death! (Li Zhi 2016: 87-88)³

This text may well contain a premonition of Li Zhi's own fate and intellectual blame. He emphasizes the threats that a thoroughly philosophical life is exposed to. They are three, and they are inseparable. The accusation of privileging the company of friends and sages at the expense of the respect for the four relationships underpinning Confucian ethics (prince and subjects, father and son, elder and younger brother, husband and wife) is supplemented by He Xinyin's alleged inability to opportunistically adapt his words and conduct. This rigidity of principles ends up in rumors that He used his clan's resources to establish meeting and study places that were gradually taken over by parasites and idlers.

The actual causes of He Xinyin's death are still debated. Did the almighty Grand Secretary, Zhang Juzheng (張居正 1525-1582) order his execution after He criticized his authoritarian inclination? Did zealous, servile officials try to please the prime minister by having him beaten to death? In any case, this murder sparked civil indignation and revolt movements that negate the classic argument of all the thurifers of the state apparatus against opponents in China: 'His choices led him to death!'

If we look at the three attacks used to discredit He Xinyin under a positive light, the subversive potential of his thought and his life becomes apparent: friendship, truthfulness, and solidarity form in his thought a cluster of meaning and action that calls for a reappraisal of power relations.

An essay on friendship

He Xinyin's surviving works are slim. They fit into a volume of about one hundred and fifty pages. It consists in a large part of letters to friends and opponents; it also includes a set of long articles dealing with the moral and economic reorganization of his extended clan. These articles constitute an initial attempt to establish a society called the 'Hall of Collective Harmony' (聚和堂) in which educational activities, tax collection, or resource management were conceived on an egalitarian basis, and tasks were assigned according to moral qualities rather than to kinship ties⁴. The first three fascicles comprise theoretical texts on matters debated within the Taizhou school⁵,

¹The allusion is to Confucius' *Analects* (X, 2).

²The expression also echoes the *Analects* (XIV, 3).

³Cf. Li Zhi's 'Essay on He Xinyin' (何心隱論), in He Xinyin (1960: 11-12). See also Billeter (1979: 163).

⁴This quasi-autarchic society had a quite long life and was probably dissolved in 1556, as local officials saw it as an encroachment on their prerogative to collect taxes and a hindrance to their 'right' to embezzlement and prevarication.

⁵The Taizhou School, located in the coastal area of the lower Yangzi region, develops Wang Yangming's teaching in an iconoclastic mode and holds that every man is potentially a sage. See Lidén (2018).

which He Xinyin is part of. The Taizhou school developed Wang Yangming's (1472–1529) conception of an innate knowledge of the good by insisting on the examination of personal consciousness and a self-cultivation focused on the ordinary forms of daily life, as in *Chan* Buddhism. In this context, the *Four Books* of Confucianism⁶ are freely interpreted; the School scrutinized the relationship between the study and the discussion of the classics (*jiangxue* 講學), the cardinal status and extension of the virtue of humanity and benevolence (*ren* 仁), the nature of reverent attention (*jing* 敬) to the tiniest occupations or the singular diversity of human relationships. Practices of concentration of the mind are combined with diverse forms of exchange, where debate, sincere argumentation, and the space between masters and disciples appear as enhanced forms of meditation.

These themes, which focus on the construction of a personal identity, are addressed in He Xinyin's mostly short yet extremely dense essays. Written in an erudite, allusive, and concise language, they often resist translation and require paraphrasing to convey their content.

Such is the case with a brief text soberly entitled 'A conversation on friendship'. Its core thesis is sharply stated and from the outset situates friendship as an extension of 'Harmony' that unfolds naturally:

The mutual exchange between Heaven and Earth is called 'Harmony' and is wholly realized in friendship. Friendship naturally unfolds it, and so are in the friendly exchange both the Way and the study accomplished. (He Xinyin 1960: 2.28)

The first sentence originates in the *Book of Changes* and refers to the book's eleventh hexagram, 'Tai' ䷊, represented by three full lines (*yang*) – the image of Heaven – surmounted by three broken or lines (*yin*) – the image of Earth. In the traditional interpretation, the moment of 'Harmony' is when celestial breaths irrigate earthly energies from below – when, according to the ancient commentaries attributed to Confucius, 'Heaven is beneath the Earth'. Harmony is therefore paradoxically represented by an inversion of natural positions⁷. The state of equilibrium and maximum interaction represented by this hexagram thus implies that exchange or interweaving runs counter to a rigid, hierarchical relationship defined once and for all, and that the inversion of positions is consubstantial with a harmonious unfolding of the world.

This idea is not irrelevant to He Xinyin's conception of friendship. By taking the *Book of Changes* form of interaction as a model, he certainly sees the relationship of friendship as a harmonious exchange, but more fundamentally as a permanent and steadily renewed disruption of hierarchical positions (and not simply as a cancellation of these hierarchies).

Friendship stems from the model of natural transformations, which are thought of as a permanent exchange, a diffuse and mutual influence of complementary and

⁶The *Four Books* are a collection of texts comprising *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, the *Analects*, and the *Mencius*. From the 12th century onwards, this Confucian corpus formed the basis of study, and was intended as propaedeutic to wisdom before reading the classics.

⁷The opposite sign, the 12th (where standard positions are respected), indicates the Obstruction, when energies remain in their place and no longer communicate.

contrasting energies. Above all, He argues, friendship is the true extension of this exchange. To better understand his reasoning, we should keep in mind that for classical Chinese thought, social and cultural order is ideally conceived not in opposition to the natural order, but as a continuation of it. The Way of Heaven (*tiandao* 天道) becomes actual in the Way of Men (*rendao* 人道), and since the former is interaction, the latter shall be able to find a similar logic in particular forms of exchange. This is the role of friendship, according to He Xinyin, as it is the only thing capable of ‘holding’ and ‘naturally relaying’ (*bing* 秉) the need for natural exchange. More specifically yet, it is in friendship that the Way (of transformative interaction) and the study of it (the condition for deeply understanding it and achieve self-transformation) are realized.

The extension and philosophical reach that He Xinyin ascribes to friendship becomes even more apparent further in the text. He argues that none of the other four interpersonal relationships (between sovereign and minister, father and son, elder and younger brother, husband and wife) can serve as a model and fulfill the requirement of universal interaction at work in nature:

In the relationship between elder and younger brothers, an exchange is always at work, but it is one of contiguity (*bi* 比) and cannot yet model itself on the mutual exchanges between Heaven and Earth. Are they capable of being ‘distinguished but not arrogant’?

In relations between spouses, father and son, sovereign and subject, an exchange is always at work; sometimes it is partnership (*pi* 匹), sometimes familiarity (*ni* 昵), sometimes encroachment (*ling* 陵) or dependence (*yuan* 援). In a world⁸ made up of eight mouths to feed, in a world made up of a hundred clans, there is always exchange, but is it always petty in the eyes of Exchange? Are they capable of ‘being distinguished but not arrogant’? (He Xinyin 1960: 2.28).

These lines require no commentary. The four relationships that form the bedrock of ethical relationship in Confucianism are not, as Li Zhi hyperbolically wrote, discarded – but they are downplayed provided they cannot satisfy the requirement of universal interaction and influence. All in all, they are mere relations of contiguity within the family, of intimacy, of clan merging in marriage, or relations of force in the case of power relations. In short, they are forms of affiliation motivated by well-calculated interests rather than freely consented relationships as in friendship. And, as we will see later, they fail to establish a society.

‘The good man’, said Confucius, ‘is at ease without being haughty; the petty man is haughty without being at ease’ (*Analec*s, 13.26)⁹.

The somewhat abrupt presence of this quotation may come as a surprise. It comes with a shift in meaning: the term we translate as ‘to be at ease’ (*tai*) is the same as the

⁸Literally ‘a Heaven-Earth’.

⁹The text of the *Analec*s is quoted from Zhu Xi (2016: 149). I translate here as closely as possible to He Xinyin’s text and according to the context. Ames & Rosemont, Jr. suggest: ‘Exemplary men are distinguished but not arrogant; petty persons are the opposite’ (1999: 169). Zhu Xi for his part glossed the two opposed pairs as ‘ease and calm’, on the one hand, and ‘sufficiency and sloppiness’, on the other (2016: 149).

one that opened the essay: 'Harmony'. Here again, what might appear as a peculiarity finds its *raison d'être* in Chinese thought, at least since the Song dynasty (960–1279), in a key idea of neo-Confucianism: all the classics speak with the same voice, and any passage in a canonical text can be explained by any other passage in the same Confucian corpus, provided the vocabulary overlaps. In this case, the harmonious relationship that belongs to a natural exchange can be interpreted for human relationships in the gap between a person's positive ease and a haughtiness that leads to forms of sloppiness (*jiao* 驕). He Xinyin carefully distinguishes between these two states of mind, however close they may seem: both refer, he says, to a 'fullness of breath'. Whether at ease or haughty, the person is entirely self-reliant; outwardly, nothing seems to differentiate these two states. However, the good man, in this case Confucius himself, when he gives free rein to his heart, is always guided by the Way and the study; and in the study he practices, argues He Xinyin quoting another passage from the *Analects* (9.8), he reveals himself as 'empty' (*kongkong ru* 空空如)¹⁰. Empty: without prior knowledge, prejudice, or intention, without boasting the proud haughtiness of the knower, without availing himself of the position he occupies in the particular relationship he temporarily belongs to. By contrast, the 'petty man' is full of himself, he is certain of being in a defined position that comforts him within a range of pre-established reactions. And yet, He writes, it is because we do not fall into or lock ourselves into the shortcomings of the four relationships that we can actually behave like fathers or sons, brothers, husbands or wives, subjects or princes. All bonds other than friendship are *closed* bonds, trapped by the structure of the relationships; only friendship can enact and fulfill the bonds, because for He Xinyin, friendship contrasts openness with hierarchical relationships.

The essay 'On Friendship' could end there. On the verge of finishing it, He emphasizes his initial thesis: only the relationship of friendship is isomorphic to the model and norm of natural exchange. Let us try to summarize. Friendship is the only relationship that measures up to the interaction between Heaven and Earth. If the human Way is to build on the Way of Nature, if it is to extend its harmonious transformations into the social order, then it should be conceived as an exchange in which openness of mind and reversibility of position are paramount. According to He Xinyin, such an openness of mind and conscience, free from all preconceptions, welcoming dialogue and the uniqueness of encounters, constitutes the (quasi-cosmological) foundation of friendship. But what kind of friendship are we talking about? While there is nothing in the text to define its content, and no specific form can be assigned to friendship, it is nevertheless clear that the friends he has in mind are 'in the Way and in study'. Let us simplify even a bit more: for him, study is a form of self-cultivation that leads to 'the emptying of one's consciousness' and to privileging, in the relationship with others, a disposition to ever more profound, deep, boundless interaction, which overlaps with the Way - or reality. He claims that only friendship can bring emptiness into relationships. Friendship is therefore the bedrock of all human relationships; it irrigates them and provides them with their own singularity. The father-son relationship,

¹⁰Quoted after Zhu Xi (2016: 110–111). See Ames & Rosemont, Jr. (1999: 127–128): 'Do I possess wisdom? No, I do not. But if a simple peasant puts a question to me, and I come up empty, I attack the question from both ends until I have gotten to the bottom of it'.

to take just one example, is thus no longer defined in a ritualized and abstract way, but becomes a relationship of a father to *his* son and vice versa.

A society of friends?

Oddly, this short text made of about 240 characters begins with an abstract definition of friendship, building on the *Book of Changes*, and ends with the figure of Confucius – as if He Xinyin aimed at replacing a praise of the friend par excellence with a philosophical discourse on friendship.

After repeating the essay's initial thesis, He concludes:

The Master's moral value is stronger than Yao's and Shun's. These two form a world, [while] the Master is a world in himself: sometimes Heaven, sometimes Earth, the exchange [by himself]. (He 1960: 28)

The phrasing is somewhat sloppy and definitely cryptic, and it can be reasonably assumed that this obscurity is intended. These closing statements hint that the reflection on friendship may acquire political and social purposes. Yao and Shun are two quasi-mythical rulers whom Confucians place at the onset of Chinese civilization; they represent the golden age of governing with the virtue of humanity (*renzheng* 仁政) – a social order in which power is not handed over from father to son but transmitted through transformative moral power, a world where the relationship between the prince and his subjects functions as a model for all social relations. As we read in the 'Zong-zhi' (宗旨, in He Xinyin 1960: 37), at that time in Chinese history the rules of political and social life depended on the 'principle of sovereignty' (*huangji* 皇極) as that which establishes the guiding ideas and principles of action. Yao and Shun, the wise ruler and the wise minister, are related to each other in a way that resembles the link between Heaven and Earth: since the *Book of Changes*, Heaven embodies the principle of initiative and Earth the principle of implementation. According to this social model, there is complete cooperation between ruler and minister, and all human relationships follow this very model.

This particular age was followed by the Three Dynasties (chronologically, Xia, Shang, and Zhou), in which transmission of power by virtue was replaced by transmission through agnatic lines. The interaction of father and son thus became the new model of social relations. But, as we have seen, He considers that this kind of relationship carries a risk of partiality and familiarity.

In his essay 'On Friendship', He Xinyin claims that Confucius gave rise to a new regime of social relations and political organization. As exaggerated as it could seem, Confucius alone embodies a world in himself (a Heaven-Earth, in He's words) because, depending on the relationships that he is involved in, he may equally exert the heavenly function of initiative and the earthly one of implementation¹¹. His behavior is never ascertained in advance according to pre-established attitudes; on the contrary, it is always grounded in the singularity of each situation. Confucius condenses and

¹¹The 'Great Commentary on the Appended Phrases' ('Xici dazhuan' 繫辭大傳), one of the commentaries to the *Book of Changes* (traditionally ascribed to Confucius) defined the Way as 'the alternance of the time of *yang* and the time of *yin*'.

embodies the transformative power of the Way. But this flexibility is linked to his friendly openness. In He's philosophical account of history, Confucius marks the advent of a new, ideal form of government that no longer depends on the relations between prince and subject, or on father and son, but which would rely on associations of friends to freely discuss social and political orientations, as well as moral practices.

He Xinyin tried to outline the guidelines of such a social organization in an essay that follows 'On Friendship' and builds on it. This essay is titled 'Conversation on the Community' and it begins as follows:

A community takes as its model the family in which individuals are sheltered; and those who lead the community use the individual as a model to place emphasis on the family. Were this not the case, were each individual enclosed in their individuality and each family within itself, there would be no visible enrichment for the community. Why? It would be apparent indeed that the community places no value [on the group] nor does it shelter [the individuals]. ('Yu hui' 語會, in He xinyin 1960: 28-29).

A community or free association is neither a family nor a collection of individuals. What makes it special, and the actual ground of its strength and value according to He Xinyin, is that it holds together the individual and the collective, to no detriment of either. The family or clan emphasizes bonds of subordination along with social rules grounded in the relations of the kinship system; the individual is 'framed' by a rituality that prevents the free expression of talents and virtues. On the other hand, when individuals – persons (*shen* 身), writes He – assert themselves, family bonds are inevitably disarticulated. To preserve an active tension between individuals and the collective, He argues, community leaders shall rotate: the different individuals who will manage the community shall strengthen the cohesion of the group, which in turn will protect the individuality of its members.

These forms of association were not utterly new in He Xinyin's days. They were largely practiced in Song academies (*shuyuan* 書院) and proliferated under the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Academies flourished at the margins of the administrative framework of official educational systems by bringing together masters and disciples in freely and mutually agreed patterns of study, which focused on strategies of self-cultivation and ways to reach wisdom rather than on providing access to mandarin careers. Discussions in common, debates, and unconstrained interpretation of the classics formed the peculiar methods and bedrock of those new schools. As he regularly attended them during his long years of peregrination, He Xinyin clearly has their model in mind. He innovates, however, in two respects. While he shares their goal, i.e., to bring individuals together in order to enhance social harmony and moral enrichment, he places greater emphasis on the friendly bonds that these associations must rely upon; and he significantly broadens their scope. As he notes in his 'conversation', these associations must involve traditional social layers (peasants, craftsmen, merchants, and scholars), integrate them, and transcend them. Much like Confucius, who did not exclude anyone from his school, whether poor or ordinary men, He Xinyin believes that community life, founded as it is on the friendly bond of listening, welcoming, and respecting everyone's dignity, must be open to all social conditions; that it should be possible to join in it on the sole ground of one's own skills and talents; and

that it shall bring together worthy men regardless of their wealth or lineage. What is more, it shall embrace the whole country and all under heaven (*tianxia* 天下).

It is no surprise then that He Xinyin ends the essay with the figure and legacy of Confucius, as he did in his other text on friendship:

An 'individual' must lead the community, and a 'family' be part of the community, for good men to be at ease (*tai*) in their own individuality; thus, by joining into a community, they would value the families of peasants, craftsmen, merchants, and scholars, and therein shelter the individuals [of these social categories]. Confucius was one such good man: he celebrated the collective in the kingdoms and in all under Heaven, and, in them, he sheltered the individual within a community. Such a community will eventually appear and take shape again ('Yu hui' 語會, in He Xinyin 1960: 28-29).

He Xinyin's phrasing is intricate. We can try to partly elucidate it. Allusive and enigmatic as it may appear, this passage is nonetheless based on some 'historical' features of the Master's biography as they have been recorded by the tradition. First, a reading of the *Analects* shows that all of Confucius' 70 main disciples are clearly identifiable¹². Their temperaments are briefly outlined: some are lively and impetuous, some slow or obtuse, some eloquent or prudent. The *Analects* present a portrait gallery of diverse, highly individualized individuals, to whom the Master lavishes his teaching according to their degree of understanding and their advancement in study. This peculiarity of the *Analects* is unquestionably the source of He Xinyin's defense of the individual. On the other hand, in his tribulations and wanderings through the Chinese provinces, as well as when he returned to his homeland at the end of his life and devoted himself to teaching, Confucius did indeed practice a communal way of life, which included forms of financial and moral support. Finally, in a passage of the *Analects* which He Xinyin may have built on, we read the following statement by Master Zeng, the disciple who led Confucian thought into the practice of filial piety: 'Through refinement, the good man attracts friends who in return enhance the virtue of humanity' (*Analects*, 12.24, in Zhu Xi 2016: 141)¹³. The clue is perhaps weak, but it is in line with He's secret and allusive writing: the term that we have translated as 'attract' (*hui*) is the same he uses to construe his idea of an association or community (*hui*).

This subtle marker confirms that He Xinyin has in mind an association of good men and 'friends in the Way'. In addition, He uses the same terms he used in the essay on Friendship to define a friendly disposition: a state of ease (*tai*) and of paradoxical fullness – 'paradoxical' because devoid of any particular intention or prejudice.

We may now appreciate the plasticity of traditions building on Confucius. In looking at the Master as the epitome of the true friend, He Xinyin joins in a way of reading ancient Confucianism which belonged to the largely iconoclastic school of Taizhou; however, he also opens a new path. Sinology has a long tradition of denying validity

¹²Sima Qian (145-86 B.C.), China's first great historian, brought together in his *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記) the different traditions referring to those disciples, highlighting their peculiarities as well as their social origins. See *Shiji*, 67, 'Kongzi dizi liezhuan' 仲尼弟子列傳.

¹³See Ames and Rosemont, Jr. (1995: 160): 'The exemplary person attracts friends through refinement and thereby promotes authoritative conduct'.

to a conception of the individual in China. The individual would only exist in an ersatz of family relations and it would trigger shattered and fragmented personalities within the field of social interactions – as if I were always defined by contrast, temporarily, in a relational vis-à-vis that would never attain a core identity. This construal is only partly correct in the history of Chinese thought, and it does not do justice to the numerous periods in which thinkers have attempted to bring out an individual entity by rejecting a social structure based on the family or on politics.

Since the neo-Confucianism of the Song dynasty, and in particular in Zhu Xi's then Wang Yangming's work, the way to political sovereignty stems from self-cultivation: 'Those who in ancient times wanted to highlight the brightness of moral power, governed their country first; those who wanted to govern their country, first harmonized their family; those who wanted to harmonize their family, first cultivated their own person'¹⁴. Self-reform is a prerequisite for handling family and the state in harmony; the individual, insofar as he transforms himself and gradually gets rid of his limits and his 'self' (which is merely a name for the constraints that obstruct moral awareness), gains access to his own humanity.

This conception forms the bedrock of He Xinyin's thought. His own contribution, though, lies in the way this individual entity attains sovereignty. By describing a dialectic link between the individual and the collective, the 'Conversation on the Community' project the essay on friendship into the social sphere. No form of social interaction in the ideal society he envisions could be conceived without this prerequisite. He depicts friendship with others and with the world as the ground of an open subjectivity and of social life; the friend, ideally embodied by Confucius, becomes the epitome of the accomplished man.

Friendship and power

He Xinyin undoubtedly realized early on the utopian nature of a social project built on friendship and, more fundamentally perhaps, on a pattern of rotating authority within a community of good men. The reorganization of his clan in the 'Hall of Collective Harmony', which anticipated the practical aspects of his social ideal, was soon to clash with the reality of local power dynamics and with the power of regional officials, the guardians of imperial authority. The sources of He's life that have come down to us do not allow us to reconstruct any actual attempts to implement such a society. He Xinyin gathered a large number of disciples and made all efforts to create communities akin to academies; yet he was unable to sustain them in the long term. Constantly hounded by administrative authorities, forced to travel and wander incessantly to escape calumny

¹⁴See Zhu Xi, 'Daxue zhangju' (2016: 3). These well-known lines continue to the roots of self-cultivation: 'correctly orienting moral consciousness, making one's intentions authentic, deploying knowledge, and inquiring about things'. Debates between different schools have largely focused on the definition of these terms. A rational approach emphasizing the reason of things (*li*) was opposed to a more intuitive focus on consciousness (*xin*): the main contrast consists of the opposition between a gradual, patient learning about things and an immediate knowledge of good and evil conceived as inscribed in human nature. However, these controversies do not affect the idea that the source of the harmonious ruling of the human world lies in the person, who, when duly cultivated, leads to forms of transformative singularity that share the same content: an empty consciousness, which is available for interaction with things and the world.

and attacks, he must have thought of his own destiny as similar to Confucius': a life at odds with the world as it was.

Yet he never wavered on the place of friendship in power relations. In a letter to one of his friends and disciples, with whom he held a philosophical correspondence, he clearly argues for the key role that friendship is to play in human government:

The attainment of the Way begins at its highest level in the relationship between prince and minister; at the lowest level, it ends in the bond between friends. When the lower acts together with the higher, the way of father and son, of elder and younger brothers, of husband and wife can be merged into them [the other two relationships] and thus attained. Yet, these relationships are critical for attaining the Way, but they can hardly unite all under Heaven. It is only through [cooperation of] ruler and minister that heroes in the world can come together; humanity, provided it forms the ground of government, will then cover the whole world. [...] It is only in the relationship between friends that the foremost talents on earth can be brought together; provided humanity forms the ground of teaching, all men under Heaven will turn to it. [...] If the way of friends does not form the ground of teaching, the way of the ruler and the minister is not fostered; if the relationship between the ruler and the subjects fails to reveal the [good] government, the way of friends cannot be effective. [...] Are not these two ways just like the reverse and the obverse (*biaoli* 表裏) [of good government]?' ('Yu Ai Lengxi shu' [Letter to Ai Lengxi], in He Xinyin 1960: 66)¹⁵

The government as described in this letter is still ideal. At the top, it is represented by the exemplary relationship between Yao and Shun, where the latter is the minister of the former and between them there is also a bond of friendship. At the bottom, friendship is embodied by Confucius. Implicitly arguing against the imperial practices of his time, He Xinyin's aim is to define the principles of good government as based on a *double legitimacy* and a *double mission*, which must work closely together. The relationship between ruler and subject reflects the power of initiative, which, as long as it is grounded in the virtue of humanity and solidarity (*ren*), is capable of uniting heroes, i.e., individuals who would sacrifice their lives to fulfill the moral virtues of benevolent acceptance of others and of appropriate conduct depending on the contexts (*ren* and *yi*)¹⁶. It is up to the Way of Friends to 'define' the content, forms, and practices of moral teaching from below; it alone, writes He, can bring together all the eminent talents under Heaven, all those who make cultivation and self-fulfillment, quest for wisdom and learning of true 'humanity' the ultimate goal of their life. For He Xinyin, these 'eminent talents' are not exclusively to be found among the *literati*: they can come from

¹⁵Two letters addressed to Ai Lengxi have come down to us.

¹⁶These are the two cardinal virtues of Confucianism since the *Mencius*. The first is characterized by the tension that naturally leads every human being to welcome others with benevolence, a virtue that must be cultivated for the person to not shrink into self-interested practices; the second, generally translated as 'equity', consists in adapting one's action to the specificity of situations, and refers to 'just' conduct because it takes into account the diversity of circumstances and contexts. These two virtues are at once complementary and opposed; since Song neo-Confucianism, they have defined the whole ethical complex.

any origin. Discourses on the way obviously matter, but as essential are the actual practices of all those committed to a thoroughly ethical life. As shown by Confucius, this moral teaching can only take shape through forms of discussion as the ones described in the *Analects* – non-dogmatic and non-uniform practices of self-cultivation. In other words, if these friends in the Way share the common goal of identifying the contours of ‘humanity’, the paths that lead to this aim are personal and should be refined through free practice and discussion. He Xinyin constantly emphasizes this point.

If we had to find modern equivalents for the two types of relationship that according to He define good government, a fairly accurate description would point at an executive power (the relationship between ruler and minister, representing the power of action and decision), and at a deliberative power (the relationship of friendship that defines the content of the Way). They are the two sides of the same coin, and one cannot exist without the other, just as the reverse side of a garment cannot be dissociated from its obverse (*biaoli* 表裏). While we cannot strictly speak of a dyarchy, we can nevertheless measure the deeply subversive reach of He Xinyin’s thought, at least for ancient Chinese political history.

Traditionally, power does not exceed the relationship between the ruler and the minister, or the subject. These two entities can be diversely understood, and they have indeed been conceived in many different ways in Chinese history. But they are always arranged according to a hierarchy and eventually found their model in the son’s subjection to the father. He Xinyin utterly reverses this perspective: the source of politics shall come from below, and it takes shape in communities of friends driven by the same aspiration to humanity; the decision-making entity is to some extent reduced to a cog or a transmission belt. The political order is upside down, or rather, as He likes to put it, Heaven is beneath and Earth is above.

He Xinyin’s thought belongs to a historical context in which, under Ming authoritarian rule, reflecting on the status of friendship would provide a refuge to scholars increasingly distanced from the circles of power. For all his surviving works and the few biographical traces he left can disclose, friendship acquired for him a philosophical and political meaning that goes far beyond the inconsequential collections of essays on friendship that swarmed across China, following Matteo Ricci’s publication of his treatise *On Friendship* in 1596. A few key points might be recalled here. With the ‘Essay on Friendship’, the fifth and last social relationship takes for the first time a foremost place. Friendship comes to fulfill the operating mode of reality or the Way in the human order, i.e., interaction; friendship takes on an unprecedented depth, as it represents and at the same time teaches the Way. Interaction is more meaningful and powerful when the poles involved are devoid of all determination. And likewise, He says, a relationship of friendship is more intense when it creates a bond between individuals devoid of preconceptions, prejudices, or intentions. In this sense, friendship is open-mindedness, which expresses the whole of the moral way. As we tried to show, He Xinyin’s aim is to build a social project on friendship. The brevity and obscurity of his ‘discussion on community’ make it difficult to understand the actual forms that this project would take; yet it should be emphasized that it is in this context that He argues for the affirmation of the individual. In a way, it is in the relationship of friendship that a free and open subjectivity is grounded. Finally, friendship and the society of friends are entrusted with a critical mission for achieving good government: it is for the ‘friends in the Way’ to define the moral orientation of power, and thus to

supplement the vertical exercise of authority with a deliberative body that finds its attainment in the 'horizontal' practices (as we would say today) of open discussion. In short, He Xinyin's relationship of friendship forms the ground of two major freedoms, the freedom of expression and the freedom of association, which possibly take shape for the first time in his work.

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