

The Chinese Path to Modernisation

Discussions of "Culture" and "Morality" in Republican China

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HCM 2 (3): 211–228

DOI: 10.1557/HCM2014.3.THON

Abstract

In this paper, I will examine the notion of "alternative modernity" that was prominent during Republican China. In the first section, I will discuss "the debate on science and the philosophy of life" (1923) and the debate over total westernisation (1935), highlighting the two main areas of contention between the May Fourth intellectuals and their critics: scientism and populism. In the second section, I will compare the writings of four thinkers: Liang Shuming (1893-1988), Wu Mei (1894-1978), Liu Yizheng (1880-1956), and Chen Yinke (1890-1969), focusing on how they used "culture" (*wenhua*) and "morality" (*daode*) to chart a Chinese path to modernisation. In the third section, I will discuss the reasons for a lack of support for alternative modernity in Republican China.

Keywords: alternative modernity, culture, May Fourth New Culture Movement, morality, westernization

1 Introduction

Of the many momentous events in Republican China (1911-1949), the May Fourth Movement is most important in shaping the contours of modern Chinese intellectual history. Combining three historical episodes – a language reform to replace classical Chinese with the vernacular (1916-1917), a series of student protests to defend China's sovereignty against foreign imperialist powers (1919), and a totalistic critique of the Confucian tradition launched by the writers of *New Youth* magazine (1915-1923), the May Fourth Movement strongly expressed the determination of Chinese intel-

article into three sections. In the first section, I will discuss the debate on science and the philosophy of life (1923) and the debate on total westernisation (1935), highlighting two major areas of contention between the May Fourth intellectuals and their critics: scientism and populism. In the second section, I will examine the writings of four thinkers: Liang Shuming (1893-1988), Wu Mi (1894-1978), Liu Yizheng (1880-1956), and Chen Yinke (1890-1969), focusing on how they used “culture” (*wenhua*) and “morality” (*daode*) to chart a Chinese path to modernisation. In the third section, I will discuss the reasons for a lack of support for alternative modernity in Republican China, and reflect on the revival in interest in alternative modernity in contemporary China.

2 Separating Modernisation from Westernisation

To a great extent, the May Fourth view of modernisation was Eurocentric. Based on the history of Europe since the fifteenth century, the May Fourth intellectuals developed an argument for a progression of human society from tribalism through feudalism to nation-state.⁵ In tribal society, human beings accepted a mobile lifestyle and the matriarchal family structure to serve the hunting-and-gathering economy. In feudalism, human beings adopted a settled lifestyle and the patrilineal family structure to pass on land from generation to generation in an agricultural economy. Finally, in nation-states, an industrial economy would flourish only when there was a constant supply of skilled workers who were professionally trained and were eager to compete for a fixed salary. For the May Fourth intellectuals, since Europe was the first place in the world to create nation-states and an industrial economy, Europe was unquestionably the universal model of modernisation for the rest of the world.⁶

But some Chinese intellectuals began to question this sanguine view after witnessing the tremendous destruction in WWI. For instance, the scholar-journalist Liang Qichao (1873-1929) wrote a moving memoir after touring the war-torn Europe in 1919. In his memoir, Liang not only meticulously chronicled the massive destruction of “the Great War”, but also used the massive destruction in Europe to proclaim the end of “the dream of the omnipotence of science” (*kexue wanneng zhimeng*).⁷ For Liang, scientific development had proven to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, scientific discoveries helped to produce a large quantity of consumer goods and improve the living condition of human beings; on the other hand, they

science. In a lecture delivered at the Qinghua University in Beijing, Zhang argued that science (including rationality) was not able to solve all problems, particularly those related to human spirit, human perception, and human relations. To make his point, he distinguished science from the philosophy of life (*rensheng guan*). Whereas the former was objective, empirical and analytical, the latter was subjective, intuitive and synthetic.¹¹ To Zhang, the differences showed that while science might be able to improve material life, it was not able to improve human morality, particularly how one group of people treated the other. For matters concerning morality, Zhang asserted, one must depend on the philosophy of life that carefully examines human decisions and actions.

In defending science, the noted scientist Ding Wenjiang (1887-1936) called Zhang "a metaphysical ghost" (*xuanxue gui*) who did not accept the universality of science as a form of empirical knowledge.¹² Ding also accused Zhang of confusing readers by exaggerating the destruction in WWI and wrongly attributing the destruction to scientific discoveries. Instead, Ding argued that the destruction in WWI was caused by missteps in international politics, and that scientific learning had greatly improved human life during the last few centuries.

The exchange between Zhang and Ding lasted for a year, and other scholars including Liang Qichao and Hu Shi (1891-1962) also participated in the debate. At the end of 1923, a collection of thirty-one articles was published to present the views of both sides. For our purposes, the importance of the debate is not who won (in current scholarship, the supporters of science are considered to be the winners); rather, it represents an attempt to decenter Europe in discussing China's modernisation. Implied in Zhang Junmai's critique of scientism was a non-European path of development that would put emphasis on developing human morality rather than making material progress. By highlighting the advantage in developing a philosophy of life, Zhang suggested his fellow countrymen to establish their own criteria for modernising their country.

The possibility of a Chinese path to modernisation was again raised in 1935 during a debate over total westernisation. The debate was ignited by the publication of a manifesto signed by ten professors on January 15, 1935. In the manifesto, the ten professors argued that the Chinese must judiciously select what they needed in modernising.¹³ The publication of the manifesto was a response to the calls for total westernisation made by two westernisers: Hu Shi and Chen Xujing (1903-1967). For the two westernisers, the modernisation of China had been half-hearted in emulating the

these differences, Liang concluded that the development in the East and the West must be different, and it was wrong to expect the Chinese to follow closely the European model of modernisation.¹⁵

In the second half of the book, Liang Shuming compared three different philosophies: European, Chinese, and Indian. The comparison was not merely to underlie the distinction between modernisation and westernisation, but also to explain a complex trajectory of the growth of the human spirit. In this part of the book, Liang separated three types of human spirit – the extroversive and aggressive spirit that seeks to control nature, the passive-active spirit that finds harmony with nature, and the introversive spirit that attains inner peace.¹⁶ For Liang, these three types of human spirit led to three different developmental models: the European acquisition of wealth and power; the Confucian harmonisation of human beings with nature; the Buddhist negation of human desires by emphasising emptiness in all forms of existence.

In this comparison, Liang Shuming was able to simultaneously build on the notion of linear progression and turn it against itself. At its root, Liang's comparison was about progress. It denoted a progression of the human spirit from struggling with the material world, through harmonising with it, to withdrawing from it. This progression of the human spirit was at once a deepening of spiritual sensitivity and a self-realisation by turning inward to master oneself. More importantly, the progression began with the European attempt to conquer the material world and therefore affirmed the supremacy of the European developmental model. And yet, this progression went further until it completely undermined the European model with the Chinese idea of harmony and the Indian idea of emptiness. In the end, the progression supplanted the European domination and declared the victory of the Chinese and Indian models.

To many Chinese readers, Liang Shuming's comparison was at once liberating and reassuring. It was liberating because he challenged the May Fourth view that China must adopt the European developmental model. Rather than following in the Europeans' footsteps, he told his readers that they should choose the Chinese and the Indian models. On the other hand, Liang's comparison assured the Chinese that their culture (particularly the Confucian morality) would have an important role in modern life. Even though the Chinese must learn to be as aggressive as the Europeans and as self-denying as the Indians, they should be proud of their own culture, particularly with regard to harmonising with nature.¹⁷

other Western thinkers saw modern Europe as the apex of human development, Babbitt combined the learning of "East and West, and past and present".²¹

In addition to providing intellectual ammunition to counter the May Fourth iconoclasm, Babbitt's New Humanism was also attractive to Wu Mi because it gave China a role in the global discourse on modernity. By the standards of his time, Babbitt was truly "transcultural" in the sense that he attempted to articulate a global culture drawn from resources in Europe, India, and China. In his writings (such as *Democracy and Leadership*), Babbitt frequently compared thinkers around the world including Jesus of Nazareth, Siddhartha Guatama of India, Aristotle of Athens, and Confucius of China. Showing the unity in learning in all corners of the world, Babbitt first compared Jesus with Siddhartha on religious grounds, and then he compared Aristotle with Confucius on the basis of moral philosophy.²²

In this way, through the mouth of Babbitt, Wu Mi linked Confucianism to Aristotelianism and Christianity as a human quest for moral purity. In so doing, he proved that Confucianism had a significant role to play in the modern age, particularly in respect to improving human spirituality in a predominantly materialist world. More importantly, by globalising Confucianism, he made Confucianism look attractive to the Chinese when many of them wanted to modernise China in the European's image.

In the context of the 1920s, Wu Mi's globalisation of Confucianism sent an important message to restructuring China's political system. In response to the disintegration of the political order and the threat of foreign invasion, Babbitt's New Humanism appeared to offer a solution to strengthen China because it emphasised the importance of creating a public-minded aristocracy. Trained in a global curriculum that included Greek philosophy, Christian theology, Confucianism, and Buddhism, this aristocracy of character and intelligence was categorically different from the aristocracy of birth. Instead of the elite of blood, they were the elite of worth who, similar to the *junzi* (gentlemen) of the Confucian tradition, were willing to devote their lives to serving the public. For Wu Mi, while popular democracy was the ideal form of government for twentieth-century China, China must first produce a group of educated elites to serve as leaders. With the patient guidance of these educated elites, gradual change would take place first in the educational and social arena, and then in political leadership.

would take precedence over the commitment to autonomy; in time of peace and prosperity, the commitment to autonomy would take precedence over the commitment to unity. For this reason, Liu took China (*zhongguo*) to mean “finding the middle ground between opposing positions”.²⁵

For Liu, China being a “nation of moderation” was to be contrasted with Europe being a “nation of extremes.” To him, Europe was associated with gunboat diplomacy, treaty ports, indemnities, and extra-territoriality. The European domination in China suggested that Europeans were aggressive, assertive and self-centered. They were determined to pursue their own interests at the expense of the others. For him, Europe was the home of modern technological advance, providing the material conditions for Western expansion. But, with respect to balancing nature with human needs, and individual interest with public interest, Europeans were clearly one-sided. For Liu Yizheng, Europeans were materialists and selfish through and through, with no interest in spiritual and ethical matters.²⁶

On the surface, Liu appeared to make the same argument as Liang Shuming's when describing China as “a nation of moderation”. Like Liang Shuming, Liu accepted that the Europeans had revolutionised the social and political life of humankind in the last five centuries. Also like Liang Shuming, Liu saw limitations in the European developmental model and asked his fellow countrymen to focus attention on their own culture. By defining China as a “nation of moderation” and contrasting it with Europe as a “nation of extremes”, he reminded his readers that in modernising their country, they needed to learn as much from their own tradition as from Europe.

But in the context of 1930s China, Liu's discussion of China being “a nation of moderation” had a special meaning. From Liu's perspective, the development in China since the 1911 Revolution had been thoroughly one-sided. By defining China as a nation of moderation, in contrast with European extremism, he reminded his readers that in modernising the country, they needed to learn from their own history because the global process of modernisation could incorporate local traditions. He suggested that in building a new political and social system in the modern age, the Chinese should learn from their ancestors in striving for a balance between unity and diversity, centralisation and local autonomy, and public good and private interest.²⁷ Although there was no need to resurrect the tribal confederation of Yao and Shun, he counseled his countrymen not to abandon the ancient goal of forming a union of diverse groups and a government based on consensus. For him, the biggest fear in building a modern cen-

the Sui-Tang period, the cultural elites at the times did not abandon the Confucian tradition, especially the patrilineal family system. On the contrary, they strengthened it by incorporating elements of the steppes culture and modifying Indian Buddhism to meet the Chinese needs. Even though many of the Sui-Tang cultural elites were foreigners or mixed-blood, they knew that multiculturalism had to be built on the existing cultural system.

In Chen's opinion, the history of the Sui-Tang period would shed light on China's modernisation in the twentieth century. Despite the popularity of many Western ideas (e.g., communism, liberalism, pragmatism, and republicanism) in the 1920s and 1930s, Chen believed that they would eventually disappear if they were not transformed, adapted, and absorbed into the existing Chinese sociopolitical environment. To drive home his point, Chen issued a stern warning to the May Fourth iconoclasts. He argued that without adaptation and adjustment, the western ideas that were introduced into China would never become popular among Chinese intellectuals. In the end, similar to some extremely exotic Indian Buddhist ideas in Tang China, the introduced European ideas would disappear from history.²⁹

In a nutshell, Chen did not believe the Confucian family system would disappear in twentieth-century China. Despite being criticised for being paternalistic, patriarchal, and highly exploitative (especially toward concubines, bond-maids, and low-level servants), Chen saw the Confucian family system as the *ti* (substance) of Chinese society.³⁰ As a socio-economic structure, it brought together people of blood connections to work for a common goal. Being a network of kinship, it was able to serve the ancient imperial system as well as the modern nation-state; it could provide resources and human labor for an agricultural economy as well as an industrial economy.

7 Limits of China's Alternative Modernity

Through comparative philosophy or historical analyses, the four thinkers developed an argument for China's alternative modernity based on three perspectives. The first perspective focused on the dichotomy between materialism (Europe) and spiritualism (China or the East). Evident in the massive destruction in WWI, this dichotomy gave China an edge over Europe for its emphasis on developing human morality in countering excessive materialism. For this reason, all four thinkers used this dichotomy to argue for a different developmental path for China. Their argument was simple: Having seen what had gone wrong in Europe, China should avoid

cated on historical determinism. Underlying this argument is the belief that what had happened in the past determines the direction that China would take in modernisation. If one pushes this view further, it would not be enough to develop an alternative modernity in China; all nations in this world (including European countries) should develop alternative modernity, because every nation is different historically. Thus, the danger of historical determinism is that modernisation becomes so relativised and fragmented that it can never be a global phenomenon. At the same time, historical determinism allowed Liu and Chen to be specific in identifying a China's path to modernisation. In their writings, they were able to suggest concrete measures to develop China, such as the protection of local interests in state-building and the preservation of the Confucian family system.

In the end, none of these three perspectives was able to compete with the May Fourth view. In politics, the May Fourth view was adopted by both the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party, and consequently the May Fourth Movement was enshrined in the revolutionary historiography of both political parties. For half a century, from the 1930s to the 1980s, revolutionary historiography heavily shaped the historical research in China. It was in the early 1980s that scholars began to reflect on the value of "the conservative alternatives."³¹

Thus far, Yu Ying-shi offers the most convincing explanation for the predominance of the May Fourth view. He argues that since the beginning of the twentieth century, there had been continuous radicalisation of the intellectuals due to foreign invasions and political fragmentation. Both the political and cultural environments affirmed the supremacy of the European model that supported adopting aggressive measures to make China wealthy and powerful. In this situation, Yu contends, the majority of Chinese intellectuals in Republican China turned a deaf ear to the conservative voices.³²

The strength of Yu's argument is that he directs attention to external factors (such as foreign invasions and political fragmentation) in explaining the predominance of the May Fourth view. For Yu, the predominance of the May Fourth view was not because it was superior in planning for China's modernisation, nor was the failure of cultural conservatism a result of its lackluster formulation of alternative modernity. Rather, the political, social, and economic environments greatly determined the outcome of the debate on modernisation. In much of the twentieth century, Yu emphasises, the May Fourth intellectuals were on the upper hand because they could call attention to the weaknesses in China's politics, economy, and foreign policies to support their argument for more thorough westernisa-

Murthy, *The Political Philosophy of Zhang Taiyan: The Resistance of Consciousness* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

5. The notion of a linear progression in human society was popular among Chinese intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century. It became the basis for the May Fourth view of global progress. See Zhang Hao 张灏, "Zhongguo jinbainian laide geming sixiang daolu 中国百年来的革命思想道路 (The path of the revolutionary thought in China in the past hundred years)," in *Ershi shijie zhongguo sixiang shi lun*, volume 2, 384-398.
6. Leo Ou-fan Lee identifies the "newness" of the May Fourth consciousness with the unilinear temporality of progression. See his "Modernity and Its Discontents: The Cultural Agenda of the May Fourth Movement," in *Perspectives on Modern China: Four Anniversaries*, edited by Kenneth Lieberthal, Joyce Kallgren, Roderick MacFarquhar, Frederic Wakeman, Jr. (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1991), 158-177.
7. See "Ouyou xinying lu 欧游心影录 (Impressions from a trip to Europe)," in *Liang Qichao youji 梁启超游记* (Liang Qichao's travel writings) (Shanghai: Dongfang chubanshe, 2006), 13-15.
8. *Ibid.*, 106.
9. *Ibid.*, 20-21.
10. *Ibid.*, 5-6.
11. See Zhang Junmai 张君勱, "Rensheng guan 人生观 (Philosophy of life)," in *Kexue yu rensheng guan* (Science and the Philosophy of Life) (Jinan: Shandong renmin chubenshi, 1987 [1923]), 33-40.
12. See Ding Wenjiang, "Xuanxue yu kexue (Metaphysics and science)," in *Kexue yu rensheng guan*, 41-60.
13. The manifesto first appeared in the journal *Wenhua jianshe* 文化建設 (Cultural Reconstruction), 1 (1935). (For a summary of Ding's argument, see Daniel, W. Y. Kwok, *Scientism in Chinese Thought, 1900-1950* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1965).)
14. See Chen Xujing 陈序经, "Zhongguo wenhua de chulu 中國文化的出路 (The future of Chinese culture)," *Minguo ribao* 民國日報 (Guangzhou), January 15, 1934; Hu Shi 胡适, "Chongfen shijie hua yu quanpan xihua 充分世界化與全盤西化 (Sufficient globalisation and total westernisation)," in *Dagong bao* 大公報 (Tianjin), June 21, 1935.
15. Liang Shuming 梁漱溟, *Dongxi wenhua jiqi zhixue* 东西文化及其哲学 (Eastern and western cultures and their philosophies) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2006 [1922]), 16-66.
16. *Ibid.*, 67-160
17. In the final chapter of the book, Liang Shuming made clear the contemporary meaning of his comparison of the three philosophies. *Ibid.*, 161-214.
18. Wu Mi 吴宓, "Bai Bide lun minzhi yu lingxiu" 白璧德論民治與領袖 (Babbitt's view on democracy and leadership), *Xueheng* 32 (August 1924): 1-23; "Bai Bide lun ouya liangzhou wenhua" 白璧德論歐亞兩洲文化 (Babbitt's view on the cultures of Europe and Asia), *Xueheng* 38 (February 1925): 1-25; "Bai Bide lun jinhou shi zhi qushi" 白璧德論今後詩之趨勢 (Babbitt's view on the future development of poetry), *Xueheng* 72 (November, 1929): 1-5.
19. Wu Mi 吴宓, *Wu Mi riji* 吴宓日记 (Diaries of Wu Mi), volume 2 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1998), 45-6; Wu Mi, *Wu Mi zibian nianpu* 吴宓自编年谱 (The annals of Wu Mi) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1995), 175-182.
20. Hu Xiansu 胡先驕, "Bai Bide zhongxi renwen jiaoyu tan" 白璧德中西人文教育談 (Babbitt's ideas of eastern and western humanistic education) *Xueheng* 3 (March 1922): 1-12.