

The Chinese Path to Modernisation

Discussions of “Culture” and “Morality” in Republican China

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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, westernisation

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-

lectuals to rebuild their country based on the European model.¹ With the language reform, the May Fourth intellectuals expanded the cultural field such that the production of knowledge was no longer dominated by educated elites steeped in classical learning. With the anti-imperialist protest, the May Fourth intellectuals instilled in Chinese citizens (especially the young ones) a strong identification with the new Chinese nation founded after the 1911 Revolution. With the totalistic critique of the Confucian tradition, the May Fourth intellectuals promoted a new society based on individuals rather than family, kinship, and local networks.

This determination to adopt the European model was a result of decades of soul-searching among Chinese intellectuals. For many of them, the repeated foreign defeats since the First Opium War (1840), the failure of the late Qing government to strengthen the country (1860-1911), and the apparent efficiency and efficacy of European machinery in producing wealth and power, indicated that China must learn from Europe in order to compete successfully in the twentieth century. To make their point, the Chinese intellectuals argued that their country must learn “science” and “democracy”. For them, science meant rationality in the Western tradition, and democracy the pluralistic polity of modern Europe.²

The predominance of the May Fourth view notwithstanding, there was resistance. On many occasions, critics publicly questioned the two underlying assumptions of the May Fourth view: the efficacy of science (particularly rationality) in building a modern society and economy, and the imperative of developing a modern individuality by having a pluralistic and populist government. Although in many accounts these critics are often brushed aside as attempting to stop China from westernising, actually they were cultural conservatives who creatively used the Chinese tradition to chart a unique path for China’s modernisation.³ As modernists, these critics strongly believed that China must modernise in order to compete successfully in the twentieth century. But unlike the May Fourth intellectuals, they separated modernisation from westernisation. While they believed that the developments in Europe in the last five centuries offered valuable inspirations for modernising China, they did not see the need to follow every step that the Europeans had undertaken. Given China’s unique culture and its long history, they argued, it must modernise on its own terms while taking into consideration European experiences.

It is this notion of “alternative modernity” – a unique approach to modernisation based on one’s culture and history – that is going to be the subject of this article.⁴ To examine how this notion of alternative modernity had developed and changed in Republican China, I will divide this

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.

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

created lethal weapons that could wipe out human civilisation at one stroke.

In addition, Liang discovered that the Westphalian system of nation-states was unable to guarantee justice and fairness in international politics. Citing the decision of the Allied Powers to give the German colonies in Shandong to Japan, Liang saw the end of “the sweet dream of human justice” (*zhengyi rendao de haomeng*).⁸ Rather than redrawing the map of the world based on a mutual respect of national sovereignty, Liang found that the victorious Western powers used the Versailles Settlement to pursue their imperialist interests in East Asia.

For many Chinese readers, the most revealing part of Liang’s memoir was a brief conversation between Liang and an American writer. First, the American writer asked Liang what he would bring back to China from Europe. Speaking like a May Fourth intellectual, Liang answered that he would bring Western civilisation to China to enlighten his countrymen. After hearing Liang’s answer, the American writer sighed. He told Liang that it was pointless to bring Western civilisation to China because it had already bankrupted. In return, Liang asked what the American writer would do after returning home. Surprisingly the American writer told Liang that he would stay home to wait for Chinese civilisation to save him.⁹ For him, the Chinese civilisation provided a moral perspective that was lacking in the West. It sought to balance human desires for growth and competition with the need for compromise and collaboration to sustain the natural system.

While the conversation might be fictive, Liang underscored the fact that WWI was indeed “an epochal change in human history” (*renlei lishi de zhuanlie*).¹⁰ Clearly shown in the massive destruction and the tremendous loss of lives, Liang drew attention to the negative impact of European material progress that culminated into “the Great War.” Liang showed that the material progress (particularly in armaments and war strategies) did not improve human civilisation; on the contrary, it destroyed the world. In contrast, Chinese civilisation might be slow in producing material goods, but it promoted a balanced view with nature and a more harmonious relation among human beings.

In the 1920s and 1930s, some Chinese intellectuals eagerly used this “epochal change in human history” to challenge the May Fourth view of modernisation. The first major challenge to the May Fourth view was the debate on science and the philosophy of life in 1923. The philosopher Zhang Junmai (1886-1969), who accompanied Liang Qichao to tour the war-torn Europe in 1919, questioned the May Fourth preoccupation with

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

European model. They claimed that the result of the Chinese indecision had slowed their country's development.¹⁴

In response, the ten professors reminded readers that China had a long history and a unique culture. Rather than aimlessly following a foreign model, they argued that a successful modernisation must be carried out with respect to the unique path of development of the country. The crux of the matter, they asserted, was adopting a balanced view such that the Chinese would be critical of both their own culture and the European model. In the former, they would use the scientific methods to evaluate their own history and culture, separating what was useful to modern times from what was no longer useful. In the latter, they would examine the European achievements from the perspective of China's history and culture, and would learn from Europe in areas that helped China to grow. In short, the ten professors intended to reach a middle ground between the narrow-minded conservatives who resisted any change in China, and the westernisers who wanted to turn China into a Western country. By keeping an arm's length from both groups, the ten professors separated modernisation from Westernisation, and emphasised the need for finding a unique path for China's development.

While in these two debates, a case was made for a unique developmental path for China, no one in the debates developed a systematic theory that explained how China could be modernised based on its own culture and history. Caught in the heat of the polemics, Zhang Junmei and the ten professors focused only on countering the westerners' arguments; none of them had time or energy to advance a cohesive argument for modernising China on its own terms. For a systematic theory, we have to turn to four thinkers – Liang Shuming, Wu Mei, Liu Yizheng, and Chen Yinke – who discussed China's modernisation from a philosophical or a historical perspective.

Three Models of Human Spirit

Shortly after Liang Qichao announced the end of "the dream of the omnipotence of science", Liang Shuming published his magnum opus, *Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies* (1921). In the book, Liang Shuming devoted its first half to explaining the differences between Eastern and Western cultures. He argued that whereas the Eastern culture (including China's and India's) was introversive, intuitive and spiritual, the Western culture was extroversive, empirical and material. Because of

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

Global Humanism

Like Liang Shuming, Wu Mi also used global comparison to chart China's path to modernisation. A student of Irving Babbitt (1865-1933) at Harvard University, Wu was a specialist in European literature and classical studies. While teaching at Southeastern University in Nanjing in the early 1920s, he made sustained efforts to introduce Babbitt's New Humanism into China. As the chief editor of the journal *Xueheng* (Critical Review), he frequently published articles about New Humanism, including a translation of Babbitt's *Democracy and Leadership* (1924). He also published translations of Plato's dialogues, Aristotle's *Ethics*, and Dante's *Inferno* – the major texts that informed Babbitt's New Humanism.¹⁸

Wu Mi's attraction to Babbitt's New Humanism was intriguing because he knew very little about his teacher's purpose in promoting New Humanism. As shown in his diary and autobiography, like many Chinese students of the time, Wu lived outside of American society when he was a graduate student. Spending most of his time with Chinese students, he was more interested in learning about current events in his native country than in America.¹⁹ Given Wu's limited knowledge of New Humanism, the question is why he was attracted to New Humanism.

Based on the ways in which he presented Babbitt's ideas, it is clear that Wu Mi was attracted to New Humanism for two reasons. One was that New Humanism offered a powerful counterargument against the May Fourth iconoclasm. In particular, in the debate over how to modernise China, New Humanism provided Wu Mi with the *raison d'être* for linking China's past with its present based on classical language and a refined form of poetry. Better yet, New Humanism was a school of thought from an advanced industrialised country, the United States of America, which had seen both the benefits and harms of modernisation.

A case in point was the first article on New Humanism published in the *Xueheng* – Hu Xiansu's translation of Babbitt's essay "Humanistic Education in China and in the West".²⁰ In the editor's preface, Wu Mi tried to make Babbitt (known to his Chinese readers as "Bai Bide") relevant to 1920s China. First, he stressed that despite Babbitt's inability to read Chinese, he was well informed of the recent developments in China. Second, he pointed out that as "a leading literary critic in America", Babbitt offered a vision of society fundamentally different from that of other Western thinkers. While other Western thinkers stressed the benefits of scientism and materialism in producing more consumer goods, Babbitt focused on the role of religion and morality in shaping an individual's spiritual life. As

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.

The China-Centered Model

Whereas Liang Shuming and Wu Mi held a global perspective by comparing the European, Chinese, and Indian philosophies, Liu Yizheng focused his attention on ancient Chinese history in developing his view on China's modernisation. In the 1920s and 1930s, this turn from the global to the local was significant because it allowed Liu to clarify what had made China unique, and how that uniqueness would shape China's modernisation in the twentieth century.

In *History of Chinese Culture* (1932), for instance, Liu Yizheng devoted one third of the book to discussing three ancient dynasties: the Xia, the Shang, and the Zhou. At first glance, his lengthy discussion of the three ancient dynasties appears to be unwarranted. First, at the time when he was writing *History of Chinese Culture*, there was not much empirical information about these ancient dynasties, particularly the Xia. Second, the social and political system of the three dynasties is best described as pre-dynastic, meaning that it was primitive when compared with the gigantic and centralised empire system after 221 BCE. If indeed transformation in modern China depends on an assessment of its dynastic heritage, it does not seem necessary to spend a great deal of effort to study the precursor of the dynastic system.

A closer look, however, shows that in offering a lengthy discussion of ancient antiquity, Liu had a larger goal in mind. In discussing the three ancient dynasties, he focused not so much on the historical events, but on the profound meaning of the "great flood" (*hongshui*).²³ Citing a variety of sources, Liu argued that the great flooding of the Yellow River – around the time of the mythical figures Yao, Shun, and Yu – was the beginning of the "Chinese nation" (*minzu*). He observed that before the great flood there were only tribes in China with separate identities, some perhaps even with different ethnic backgrounds. But he stressed that a collective consciousness developed when widespread flooding occasioned a "big grouping" (*daqun*), bringing formerly disparate tribes into a confederation to organise human labour, distribute resources, and regulate the transmission of property. For Liu, this tribal confederation became the foundation of the "Chinese national character" (*guomin xin*).²⁴

According to Liu, since the common identity of being Chinese was born out of a loose confederation to combat river flooding, the "character of the Chinese nation" had to be a double bond – a commitment to collective unity on the one hand, and a commitment to preserving local autonomy on the other. While in time of flooding or war, the commitment to unity

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-

tralised state was that the state apparatus might end up subjugating the nation, the collectivity. By reminding his readers of the intended meaning of “China”, he called on them to balance the competing claims of building a centralising state, on the one hand, and preserving the autonomy of local communities, on the other.

The Open China Model

Similar to Liu Yizheng, Chen Yinke used Chinese history to express his view on modernisation. Rather than focusing on ancient antiquity as Liu did, Chen examined the cultural dialogue between China and India during the Sui-Tang period (581-907). By focusing on medieval China when the country was flooded with foreign influences, Chen was able to raise an important question concerning China’s modernisation: How did ethnic pluralism and cross-cultural encounters help China modernise?

The bulk of Chen’s study of the Sui-Tang period was focused on the Chinese absorption of Indian Buddhism, seemingly privileging foreign impact over Chinese cultural roots. But in analysing each move that the Chinese made in learning Indian Buddhism, Chen showed that genuine cultural interaction must take place in a dialectical manner – learning new knowledge and ideas from abroad, on the one hand, and reaffirming domestic uniqueness and cultural identity, on the other. In what Chen called the “dialectic of opposition and complementarity”, the foreign and the indigenous might at first look incompatible, thereby causing tension and anxiety on both sides. Eventually, with efforts and determination, the foreign would be integrated with the indigenous, bringing a new source of life into the existing socio-political system.²⁸

For Chen, the Sui-Tang period symbolised the openness in China where there was both a fervent respect for indigenous cultural heritage and a willingness to accept foreign ideas and methods. In the case of Sui-Tang multiculturalism, it was characterised by the affirmation of the tradition of imperial dynasty and the patrilineal family system, on one hand, and the inclusion of the steppes cultures and Indian Buddhism, on the other. According to Chen, it was this dialectics between the domestic *ti* (substance) and the foreign *yong* (function) that made the Sui-Tang strong and powerful in East Asia.

From Chen’s perspective, the cultural openness in the Sui-Tang period was a prime example to counter the radicalism of the May Fourth cultural iconoclasts. He pointed out that despite the openness and flexibility during

the Sui-Tang period, the cultural elites at the time 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 adaption 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.

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

committing the same mistakes as the European did. By playing up “the advantage of the latecomer”, the four thinkers predicted a promising future for a China that balanced the need for material progress and spiritual awakening.

Of the four thinkers, Liang Shuming was most elaborate and effective in developing this dichotomy. Through a comparison of the European, the Chinese, and the Indian philosophies, he highlighted not only the advantage of Chinese philosophy, but also the imperative for developing Chinese philosophy as part of the global quest for spiritual awakening. For Liang, China’s alternative modernity served the Chinese as well as the peoples around the world.

The second perspective was global humanism that Wu Mi advocated. At first glance, Wu Mi’s view appeared to be similar to Liang Shuming’s in the sense that both thinkers attempted to present modernisation as a global event. But at a closer look, there was a fundamental difference. Whereas Liang Shuming connected Europe, China, and India as parts of the global progression of the human spirit, Wu Mi compared Confucianism to Greek philosophy and Christian theology as human quests for moral purity. In Liang’s threefold progression of the human spirit, Chinese philosophy occupied a middle position: It was better than the European philosophy in its more balanced approach to nature; but it was not as good as Indian Buddhism in negating human desires. In this way, Liang avoided giving an impression of being ethnocentric. After all, Confucianism was not the highest achievement of human spirituality.

In comparison, Wu Mi’s attempt at linking Confucianism to Greek philosophy and Christian theology was a bit limiting. One may say that Wu Mi’s attempt made Confucianism look valuable to the Chinese because it had things in common with European philosophy and religion. On the other hand, one may also say that Wu Mi westernised Confucianism by making it look similar to European philosophy and religion. On this score, it is unclear whether global humanism would truly help China develop an alternative modernity. It could be a form of westernisation under the guise of matching Chinese with western thought.

The third perspective was China’s unique trajectory of development, and this perspective is especially effective in Liu Yizheng’s and Chen Yinke’s historical studies. In both cases, a part of China’s past was used to prove that China had been special in its development. Because of its uniqueness, China’s modernisation must be different from other countries, such as the emphasis on moderation (Liu Yizheng) and kinship (Chen Yinke). To a great extent, this argument for China’s unique path is predi-

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 modernities, 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-

tion. When China was weak and poor, it was easy to make the claim that the Chinese culture, however defined, caused the country's downfall.

On the other hand, in today's China, one can turn Yu's argument around to explain the fervent interest in alternative modernity. A case in point is the discussion of "Confucian capitalism" in the 1980s and 1990s when Chinese intellectuals adopted the Weberian question to look for the cultural roots of capitalism.³³ Similarly, the recent discussion of "the rise of China" also draws on such Confucian concepts as "harmony", "reciprocity", and "all under heaven".³⁴ In both instances, the demand for China's alternative modernity comes at a time when China is doing better in economy and foreign relations.³⁵ The two cases show that when the Chinese find themselves successful in adopting the Western measures to produce wealth and power, they are more eager to discuss their own path to modernity. Hence, the rise and fall of the argument for alternative modernity relies heavily on China's performance in the global competition for wealth and power. If today's China continues to grow, it is likely that there will be increasing interest in finding a unique path of China's modernity.

Notes

1. The list of the standard literature on the May Fourth Movement is long. The major ones include: Chow Tse-tung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), Lin Yü-sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: The Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
2. Despite its deceptively simple slogan of promoting "science and democracy", Zhang Hao 張灝 points out that there are many paradoxes of the May Fourth view, such as the tension between rationalism and romanticism, scientific skepticism and religion, individualism and populism, nationalism and globalism. See Zhang Hao, "Chongfang wusi: Lun 'Wusi' sixiang de lianqixing 重访五四：论“五四”思想的两歧性 (Revisit the "May Fourth: On the Paradoxes of the "May Fourth" Thought," in *Ershi shijie zhong-guo sixiang shilun* 二十世纪中国思想史论 (Studies of the Twentieth-century Chinese Thoughts), edited by Xu Jilin 许纪霖, volume 1 (Shanghai: Dongfang chubanshe, 2000), 3-30.
3. See Charlotte Furth, ed., *Limits of Change: Essays on Conservative Alternatives in Republican China*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard East Asia, 1976).
4. Recently there have been studies of alternative modernity in late Qing and Republican China. They include Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity – China, 1900-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), David Der-wei Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), Yen Wen-Hsin, ed., *Becoming Chinese: Passages to Modernity and Beyond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), Viren

- 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 中国近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* 科学与人生观 (Science and the Philosophy of Life) (Jinan: Shandong renmin chubenshi, 1987 [1923]), 33-40.
 12. See Ding Wenjiang, "Xuanxue yu kexue 玄学与科学 (Metaphysics and science)," in *Kexue yu rensheng guan*, 41-60. 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).
 13. The manifesto first appeared in the journal *Wenhua jianshe* 文化建設 (Cultural Reconstruction), 1 (1935).
 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 zhexue* 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 Mu Mi) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1995), 175-182.
 20. Hu Xiansu 胡先驌, "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.

21. Ibid., 1-2.
22. Wu Mi, "Bai Bide lun ouya," *Xueheng* 38 (February 1925): 1-25.
23. Liu Yizheng 柳诒征, *Zhongguo wenhua shi* 中國文化史 (History of Chinese culture) (Shanghai: Dongfang Chubanshe, 1988 [1928]), 10-15.
24. Ibid., 20-37.
25. Ibid., 33.
26. Ibid., 808-820.
27. Ibid., 845-863.
28. Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, *Sui Tang zhidu yuanyuan luelun gao* 隋唐制度淵源略論稿 (A brief study of the origins of the Sui-Tang political system) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1982 [1944]), 1-3.
29. Ibid., 64.
30. Ibid., 14-17.
31. See Charlotte Furth, ed., *Limits of Change*.; and Xu Jilin, ed., *Ershi shiji Zhongguo sixiang-shi lun*, especially volume 1.
32. Yu Yingshi, "Zhongguo jindai sixiangshi shangde jijin yu baoshou 中國近代思想史上的激進與保守 (Radicalism and conservatism in modern Chinese intellectual history)," *Ershi shiji Zhongguo sixiang shi lun*, volume 1, 411-440.
33. Arif Dirlik, "Confucianism in the Borderlands: Global Capitalism and the Reinvention of Confucianism," *Boundary 2*, 22 (1995): 229-273.
34. Daniel A. Bell, *China's New Confucianism: Everyday Life and Politics in a Changing Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
35. For a historical reflection on the revival of an interest in alternative modernity in contemporary China, see Axel Schneider, "Bridging the Gap: Attempts at Constructing a 'New' Historical-Cultural Identity in People's Republic of China," *East Asian History* 22 (2001): 129-44.

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