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The Ideas of the May Fourth Movement and Their Critics

Abstract

The article provides an analysis of the main ideas put forth by intellectual leaders of the May Fourth Movement, with a focus on the writings of Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu. These leaders advocated for China's modernization, promoting the abandonment of traditional Chinese cultural values in favor of adopting European models of development. Their views gained significant influence among the Chinese intellectual elites of the time. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the existence of dissenting voices who argued for the preservation of traditional Chinese culture and its values. Interestingly, some of these critics, such as Gu Hongming and Yan Fu, were highly educated in Western culture and science themselves. They presented alternative viewpoints that challenged the notion of Westernization as the only path to modernization. Gu Hongming, in particular, recognized the multifaceted nature of Western modernity and offered a comprehensive critique of Western civilization. This perspective resonated with other Chinese critics who believed that modernization should not be equated solely with the adoption of Western values and ideals.

Keywords: May Fourth Movement, Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi, Gu Hongming, Liang Shuming



Introduction

The May Fourth Movement, initiated on May 4, 1919, represents a pivotal sociopolitical shift in Chinese history. It primarily sought to reinforce China's global stature and advance widespread patriotic education. This movement profoundly influenced Chinese society, introducing novel ideologies, augmenting political and patriotic awareness, and fostering avant-garde trends in both art and literature, previously associated with the New Culture Movement¹. Subsequent mass movements in China, ranging from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to the demonstrations beneath the statue of Zhou Enlai targeting the ousting of the Gang of Four, to the Tiananmen student protests, have drawn upon the antecedents set by the May Fourth Movement².

However, historically The May Fourth Movement should not be viewed solely as an event on that specific date but rather as the culmination of efforts by Chinese intellectuals, primarily affiliated with Peking University. These intellectuals sought to disseminate a progressive way of thinking among students and the Chinese intelligentsia.

In this paper, I will first provide a brief introduction to the political context that led to the eruption of student protests on May 4, 1919. I will then examine the ideas that fueled the students' activities, primarily by analyzing the perspectives presented in the *New Youth* magazine (新青年, *Xin Qingnian*), which served as the driving force behind the New Culture Movement. Among the authors who contributed to the magazine, I will place special emphasis on Hu Shi³ and Chen Duxiu⁴, who are widely regarded as the most influential intellectuals among the younger generation. Subsequently, I will delve into the critiques of the views promoted by *New Youth* (新青年, *Xin Qingnian*). In this regard, I will highlight the roles of Gu Hongming⁵ and Liang

¹ More about cultural heritage of The May Fourth Movement see: Chen Pingyuan, *Touches of History: An Entry into "May Fourth" China*, trans. Michel Hockx, with Maria af Sandeberg, Uganda Sze Pui Kwan, Christopher Neil Payne and Christopher Rosenmeier, Leiden and Boston 2011; *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-Century China*, ed. Ellen Widmer and David Der-Wei Wang, Cambridge 1993; Feng Liping, 'Democracy and Elitism: The May Fourth Ideal of Literature', *Modern China* 22/2 (1996).

² More about connection of The Four May Movement with Chinese politics – see: Shakhar Rahav, *The Rise of Political Intellectuals in Modern China: May Fourth Societies and the Roots of Mass-party Politics*, Oxford 2015.

³ Hu Shi 胡适 (1891–1962) was a prominent Chinese scholar, philosopher, politician, and activist. He played a pivotal role in the New Culture Movement, particularly known for his advocacy of using vernacular language instead of literary Chinese. Hu Shi's philosophical ideas were deeply influenced by his mentor, John Dewey, during his studies in the United States.

⁴ Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 (1879–1949) was a prominent political activist and philosopher. In 1915, he founded the influential magazine *New Youth* (*Xin Qingnian*, 新青年), which became highly influential among young Chinese individuals in the second decade of the twentieth century. In 1921, he joined the Chinese Communist Party and assumed the role of General Secretary. However, he later distanced himself from the party due to disagreements with Mao Zedong and did not play a significant role in the subsequent history of China.

⁵ Gu Hongming 辜鸿铭 (1856–1928) was a distinguished Chinese philosopher, publicist, and scholar. He was born on Penang Island to Chinese parents and spent his teenage years in Europe, where he received a comprehensive humanistic education across several European countries. Upon returning to Asia, he became an advisor to Zhang Zhidong 张之洞 (1837–1909), one of the most influential figures during the late Qing dynasty. Gu Hongming

Shuming⁶, who challenged the notion of Western civilization's superiority and the blind imitation of its models.

The May Fourth Movement would not have emerged if China had not participated in World War I. The Chinese government declared war against Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire on August 14, 1917. The Chinese people hoped that by supporting the Entente alliance, they could regain control of the territories in China that were occupied by Germany. However, during the peace conference in Versailles, these hopes proved futile due to Japanese demands. Japan claimed that previous treaties with the Chinese government and the allied countries granted it the right to obtain land from defeated Germany on Chinese soil. After deliberation, the Allied Powers acquiesced to Japan's claims, sparking outrage among the Chinese public. As a result, large student demonstrations were held on May 4, 1919, giving the movement of protests and political engagement in China its name.

The student protests were soon joined by other social groups. Merchants and workers went on strike, while common people boycotted Japanese goods. Students and intellectuals sought to expand their influence by organizing press activities, evening schools, street speeches, and more. Of course, the authorities attempted to suppress this movement but were unsuccessful. It continued until it compelled the Chinese government to officially reject the signing of the Versailles Peace Treaty, which was perceived as a success by its members.

As Hu Shi pointed out, "It was the non-political forces – the students, the merchants, the demonstrations and street orations, and the boycott – that did the work and triumphed⁷". However, these "non-political forces" were guided by an intellectual elite. As Chow Tse-tsung observed, "During this time [of the May 4th Movement – M.T.], more of the new intellectuals were brought into closer contact with other groups in society than ever before. The scholars, previously sheltered in ivory towers, had to come out into the marketplace. Events brought them experience with merchants, clerks, urban workers, and industrialists, as well as professional politicians and political party workers. In these adventures, the new intellectuals were awakened to the need of prolonged and broad programs *to go among the masses of the people, and enlighten and organize them*⁸".

The aforementioned intellectuals primarily formed a group centered around the influential *New Youth* (新青年) magazine. Chen Duxiu served as its editor, and Hu

authored numerous books and articles, primarily in English, in which he fervently defended Chinese civilization and culture against assertions of European superiority. With the establishment of the Republic of China, he began working at Beijing University and afterwards propagate his views in Japan.

⁶ Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893–1988) was a prominent Chinese philosopher, scholar, and politician. He gained recognition for his profound analysis of cultural differences between China and the West. He held a position at Peking University, where he made significant contributions to academic discourse. Following the rise of the Chinese Communist Party, Liang Shuming maintained his independent intellectual stance, even as he collaborated with the Chinese government in advisory roles and as a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

⁷ *English Writings of Hu Shih. Chinese Philosophy and Intellectual History (Volume 2)*, ed. Chih-P'ing Chou, Berlin 2013, p. 5.

⁸ Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement. Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*, Cambridge (Massachusetts)-London 1960, p. 170.

Shi was one of the most significant contributors to the publication. The May Fourth Movement can be understood as a key event that facilitated the expansion of their circle's influence across China. This interpretation is supported by the observations of Hu Shi, who wrote: "When the year 1919 was ushered in, there was only a small group of men working in the new intellectual movement. Our monthly organ, *La Jeunesse* (新青年) had just reached its 30th issue; the University students had just published the second number of *The Renaissance* (新潮); and our *Weekly Review* (每周评论) had only had three weeks' existence. The laborers were few indeed (...) But shortly after June, 1919, there have sprung up in all parts of China numerous periodicals edited in most cases by young students who have caught the new spirit. Most of them are weeklies modeled after our *Weekly Review* which was suppressed by the Peking Government in August. Practically all of these new publications are written in the spoken language. It has been estimated that the number of such periodicals has now exceeded 400, and according to the *Sunday Review* of Shanghai, there are over 200 new periodicals in the two provinces of Kiangsu and Chekiang alone. In Changsha, Hunan, there were at one time ten weeklies of radical thinking and fearless expression⁹".

The ideas put forth by the leaders of the May Fourth Movement were rooted in the postulates of the New Culture Movement, which had commenced a few years earlier. Their aim was to bring about radical changes in Chinese culture, with the goal of propelling China forward on the path of progress, which they believed could be found in the Western world. In essence, these intellectuals sought to enact sweeping transformations in Chinese culture, including the use of vernacular language instead of literary language in books and magazines, the elimination of women's subordination, and the introduction of personal freedoms, such as the right to choose one's marriage partner.

What united them was their endeavor to introduce a new way of thinking into Chinese culture, which had traditionally been grounded in the authority of ancient sages. This new way of thinking was characterized by a critical attitude, as eloquently described by Hu Shi:

"The critical attitude is, in short, to distinguish anew the merits and demerits of all things. In more detail, the critical attitude involves several special prerequisites:

- 1) Of the traditional systems and conventions, we must ask, *Do these systems still the value to survive today?*
- 2) Of the teachings of the sages and philosophers handed down from ancient times, we must ask, *Are these words still valid today?*
- 3) Of all behavior and beliefs receiving the blind approval of society, we must ask, *Is everything that has been approved by the public necessarily correct? Should I do this, just because others are doing it? Is there no other way that is better, more responsible, and more beneficial?*¹⁰"

⁹ *English Writings of Hu Shih*, p. 1-3.

¹⁰ Hu Shih, *The Significance of the New Thought*, in: *China's Response to the West. A Documentary Survey, 1839-1923*, ed. Ssu-yü Teng and John K. Fairbank, Cambridge-London 1982, p. 252.

Undoubtedly, many of the responses to the aforementioned questions were negative. While Hu Shi emphasized the necessity of cultural transformation within the Chinese nation, figures like Chen Duxiu highlighted the importance of political changes as well. For Chen, science and democracy formed a complementary alliance that needed to be upheld in opposition to the traditional patterns of Chinese culture. When accused of undermining Chinese culture, he penned the following response on behalf of the editors of *New Youth*: “We have committed the alleged crimes only because we supported the two gentlemen, Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science. In order to advocate Mr. Democracy, we are obliged to oppose Confucianism, the code of rituals, chastity of women, traditional ethics, and old fashioned politics; in order to advocate Mr. Science, we have to oppose traditional arts and traditional religion; and in order to advocate both Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science, we are compelled to oppose the cult of «national quintessence» and ancient literature. Let us then ponder dispassionately: has this magazine committed any crimes other than advocating Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science? If not, please do not solely reprove this magazine; the only way for you to be heroic and to solve the problem fundamentally is to oppose the two gentlemen, Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science¹¹”.

In the aforementioned quotation, Chen Duxiu expressed the underlying beliefs of his intellectual circle regarding progress and the historical trajectory of humanity. According to them, the history of Europe represented a march towards the liberation of individuals in various spheres. This liberation encompassed political, religious, sexual, and economic aspects.

Political liberation entailed the overthrow of feudal systems, while religious liberation involved the dismantling of religious authority, allowing individuals to think independently in matters of faith. The liberation of women granted them participation in politics, and the pursuit of economic liberation found expression in the communist movement. In all of these cases, freedom was understood as the ability to be an autonomous individual who makes decisions independently, free from blind obedience to any authority.

From this perspective, traditional Chinese virtues such as loyalty (忠), filial piety (孝), righteousness (节), and honor (义) were seen as incompatible with this notion of freedom. Chen Duxiu employed the term “slave morality”, influenced by Nietzsche, to describe these virtues. Moreover, he argued that Chinese tradition, along with its traditional virtues, was regressive. In order for China and its culture to thrive, he asserted that they needed to embrace change, adopt modern values, and embrace a new way of thinking and institutional structures¹².

Nevertheless, as Edward Gu pointed out, the concrete political resolutions needed to bring those kinds of liberties were rather framed in very general terms by Chen Duxiu and other authors of *New Youth*. For example, “democracy” was explained as “rule

¹¹ Chen Duxiu, *Our answer against the Magazine*, quotation after Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement. Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*, p. 59.

¹² See: Chen Duxiu 陈独秀, *Jinggao shaonian 敬告少年* [Warning Youth], in Zhang Dainian 张岱年, *Xin Chao – Min chushi lun wenxuan 新潮 – 民初时文选* [The Renaissance – Selection of Articles Written in the Beginning of Republic], Shenyang 1994, p. 1–8.

of the people”, but lacked the answer to the question who are the people? – are they literally “all the people” or rather “a majority of the people”, or “the common people”, or “a nation” understood substantially¹³.

The views held by Chen Duxiu and his contemporaries were not unique to their time. They adopted common assertions made by European thinkers of the 19th century, such as Auguste Comte, who believed that the history of the world is a history of progress. When seeking examples of this progress, countries like Great Britain, Germany, and France were often cited. These colonial empires exerted global dominance, making them natural points of reference for countries experiencing colonial or semi-colonial exploitation when contemplating their own aspirations.

In this context, the most pertinent critique of Chen’s belief in progress, which entailed the abolition of monarchy, establishment of equality, and the spread of education, could be offered by a thinker well-versed in European conservative thought and its critique of this particular understanding of progress. Gu Hongming emerged as such a thinker. With his extensive education acquired in Europe and his profound understanding of European culture, he was able to engage in intellectual discourse and challenge the theses propagated by Chen Duxiu.

Gu Hongming did not directly contribute to *New Youth* magazine or engage in direct polemics with its authors. His only indirect involvement in their discussions occurred when a few Chinese thinkers debated a summary of his views published in the Japanese magazine “The Glory of East Asia,” which was later reprinted in “The Eastern Miscellany” in 1918.

Instead of delving into the analysis of the aforementioned discussion, it would be more beneficial to understand Gu Hongming’s perspectives and the differences between him and the progressive intellectuals by examining them separately.

Gu Hongming was a staunch critic of Chinese reform movements since the late Qing dynasty era. He participated in Chinese politics as an advisor to Zhang Zhidong, one of the most influential dignitaries in the Chinese court during the first decade of the twentieth century. While he acknowledged the superiority of European cannons and machine guns, he presented more nuanced views on European culture and politics.

As an individual well-versed in European cultural and political discourse, Gu Hongming was able to shed light on the complexity of historical changes in European societies throughout the nineteenth century. He recognized that the situation in European countries was multifaceted and that there were also critics of “progress” within Europe itself. Due to this awareness, he advocated for the preservation of monarchy in China and the adherence to Chinese traditional customs, while selectively incorporating elements of European civilization that suited the Chinese people¹⁴.

¹³ Eward X. Gu, ‘Who Was Mr Democracy? The May Fourth Discourse of Populist Democracy and the Radicalization of Chinese Intellectuals (1915–1922)’, *Modern Asian Studies* 35/3 (2001), pp. 598–599.

¹⁴ Views of Gu Hongming concerned with this matter were expressed in his memorial to the throne in the last years of Qing dynasty. See: Gu Hongming, *Shangde Zongjing Huangdi tiaochen shishishu* 上德宗景皇帝条陈时事书

One of Gu Hongming's key arguments was that European "progress" came at the cost of moral and social disorder. He contended that the First World War served as a clear manifestation of his thesis. According to him, while Europeans had developed scientific advancements that challenged religion and its authority, the social order was fundamentally based on religious principles. Therefore, in Gu Hongming's view, the absence of religious authority led to the breakdown of social bonds in Europe, which could only be maintained through the use of force. He wrote: „as civilization advances, mankind discovers a force more effective for subduing and controlling human passions than physical force and this force is called *moral force*. The moral force which in the past has been effective in subduing and controlling the human passions in the population of Europe, is Christianity. But now this war with the armament preceding it, seems to show that Christianity has become ineffective moral force. Without an effective moral force to control and restrain human passions, the people of Europe have had again to employ physical force to keep civil order (...) The use of physical force to keep civil order leads to war and war means destruction and waste. Thus the people of Europe are on the horns of dilemma. If they do away with militarism, anarchy will destroy their civilization, but if they keep up militarism, their civilization will collapse through the waste and destruction of war¹⁵”.

Gu Hongming put forth the argument that the social order in China was upheld by a different authority compared to Europe. He asserted that unlike Europeans, who relied on religion for maintaining social order, the Chinese people had no need for religious faith¹⁶. The presence of Confucian teachings in Chinese society, according to Gu Hongming, provided the framework for authority based on secular ideals. He contended that Confucianism could fulfill the role of religion without actually being one. This was made possible because Confucianism established a hierarchical structure of authority centered around the father, the husband, and the emperor in China. He expressed his viewpoint by stating: “three cardinal duties in Confucianism or the State religion of China, are, in their order of importance first, absolute duty of loyalty to the Emperor ; second, filial piety and ancestor worship ; third, inviolability of marriage and absolute submission of the wife to the husband¹⁷”.

As the quoted author pointed out, the role of the emperor in the aforementioned authority structure was of utmost importance, because “belief in the absolute, supreme, transcendent, almighty power of the Emperor it is which gives to the Chinese people, to the mass of the population in China, the same sense of security which the belief in God in religion gives to the mass of mankind in other countries¹⁸”.

[Memorial about actual problems to the Emperor Dezong], in: *Gu Hongming wenji xia*, 辜鸿铭文集下 [Gu Hongming Collected Writings, vol. 2], Haikou 1996, pp. 213–219.

¹⁵ Ku Hung-Ming [Gu Hongming], *The Spirit of the Chinese People with an essay on “The War and a Way out”*, Peking 1915, p. II.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

In other words, according to Gu Hongming, the order of the society is based on authority. Without it, the only means to maintain society is through violence. Europeans lose the authority which brought their society together in an orderly way, so the war came. However Chinese can evade the fate of Europeans because their social order, as Gu Hongming claimed, was based on more solid foundations, which were Confucian ideals of loyalty toward one's family and monarch. Nevertheless these ideals in order to properly influence society had to be connected with monarchical political system without which there are only rules of loyalty but there is no one to whom common people may be loyal to instead of putting their trust in God, like Europeans did and came to the I World War crisis. That is why Gu Hongming did not perceive republican ideas of European origin as progressive and good for China. In accordance with the logic of his reasoning, the establishment of republic in China as a result of Xinhai Revolution was a bad thing for his country, because it brought to China the same problems which were causing the great war in Europe, while by maintaining the monarchy China could evade them.

Chen Duxiu while discussing Gu Hongming's views emphasized that they are irreconcilable with China's real needs. According to him China is a backward country, and if it wants to advance it has to learn from European powers, which are more advanced. This implies adopting policies which led Western countries to their prosperity and strength. Among them very important is overthrowing feudal relations and establishing republic not in name only as it happened in China after Xinhai Revolution. This cannot be done without putting away the old values which are structurally connected with the monarchy and which are promoted by Gu Hongming views. Besides, Chen Duxiu argued that claim about losing authority by Western culture is ridiculous. He wrote: "After war in Europe, science, society and politics – all went thru rapid growth, and assertions that Western civilization lose its authority are very questionable¹⁹".

It is worth noting that Hu Shi held very similar views to those of Chen Duxiu. He rejected the notion that the First World War had fundamentally altered the evaluation of Western civilization. While he acknowledged the existence of problems, he maintained that the Western path of development was the only way forward for the Chinese people if they wished to avoid falling behind the contemporary world. This stance remained unchanged even after the First World War.

Hu Shi's article, "Our Attitude towards Modern Western Civilization," serves as a manifestation of his perspective. He argued that the defining characteristic of Western civilization is the pursuit of happiness, and this pursuit offers remedies for ailments such as illness, poverty, and self-deception through the advancement of science and the improvement of material living conditions²⁰.

¹⁹ Chen Duxiu 陈独秀, *Zai zhiwen „Dongfang Zazhi” jizhe* 再质问《东方杂志》记者 [New Questions to the Journalist from *Eastern Miscellany*], *Xin Qingnian* 6/2 (1919), vol. 6, no.2, in: *Xin Qingnian. Jianti diancang di. 6 juan* 新青年. 简体典藏第六卷 [New Youth. Simplified collection, vol. 6], ed. Yang Hongfeng 杨宏峰, Yinchuan 2001, p. 115.

²⁰ Hu Shi 胡适, *Women duiyu xiyang jindai wenming de taidu* 我们对于西洋近代文明的态度 [Our Attitude towards Modern Western Civilization], in: *Hu Shi wenji di si juan* 胡适文集第四卷 [Hu Shi Collected Writings Vol. 4], ed. Ouyang Zhesheng 欧阳哲生, Beijing 1998, pp. 3–22.

However, not everyone within the Chinese intellectual sphere shared the views of Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu, who continued to advocate for China's future development in alignment with the path of Europe. Following the First World War, there were individuals who believed that Western civilization had indeed experienced a decline in its former authority. Even radical reformers like Liang Qichao²¹, considered the father of Chinese nationalism, were among them.

Liang Qichao, in his writings about his travels to Europe, emphasized that many Western intellectuals themselves acknowledged that European civilization had entered a phase of crisis and needed to be "rescued" by incorporating elements from non-Western civilizations. He believed that Chinese civilization could play a role in this rescue, as it was more balanced than the Western civilization and had the potential to better integrate material and spiritual values²².

Other voices critical of the West emerged from unexpected sources, including Yan Fu, who gained renown as a translator of Western literature. Following the establishment of the Republic of China, Yan Fu²³ expressed opposition to the direction of political changes, contending that democracy was not suitable for China. During the First World War, he went as far as arguing that European ideals such as freedom, equality, and brotherhood were responsible for the devastating state of war-ravaged Europe. Eventually, he concluded that a proper understanding of Confucian virtues and values could serve as a stable foundation for a prosperous society. Yan Fu's perspectives offered a unique and alternative viewpoint in the intellectual discourse of the time²⁴.

In this manner, Liang Qichao and Yan Fu aligned themselves with Gu Hongming's perspective, which asserted that the West was facing a structural crisis due to the absence

²¹ Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873–1929) was a prominent Chinese scholar, philosopher, and politician. During his youth, he was a student and assistant to Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858–1927), one of the key figures behind the Hundred Days' Reform in 1898. Following the coup orchestrated by Empress Dowager Cixi, Liang Qichao fled China and sought refuge in Japan. He is widely recognized as one of the founding fathers of Chinese nationalism. After the establishment of the Republic of China, Liang Qichao actively participated in political life and served in the civil service. He played a significant role in shaping China's post-revolutionary landscape. Notably, he was present at the Versailles Peace Conference when China rejected the peace treaty that marked the conclusion of the First World War. Liang Qichao's contributions as a scholar and politician have left a lasting impact on Chinese history and intellectual discourse.

²² Liang Qichao, *Ouyou xinying lu* 欧游心影录 [Impressions from Europe], in: *Liang Qichao quanji* 梁启超全集 [Liang Qichao Collected Writings], ed. Yang Gang 杨钢 and Wang Xiangyi 王相宜, Beijing 1999, p. 2986.

²³ Yan Fu 严复 (1854–1921) was a renowned Chinese philosopher and translator of Western literature. He received his education at the Foochow Arsenal Academy in China and later attended the Royal Naval College in England. While working on ships and in the field of education, it was his translations that brought him widespread recognition. Yan Fu introduced significant Western concepts, including evolution and the theories of Adam Smith, to Chinese readers. During the late 19th century, he was an advocate of Westernization, promoting the adoption of Western ideas and practices in China. However, in the second decade of the 20th century, Yan Fu underwent a shift in his beliefs and became a supporter of monarchy and traditional Chinese values. This transition marked a significant change in his intellectual and philosophical journey.

²⁴ Yan Fu, *Yu Xiong Chunru shu 73 and 52* 与熊纯如书 (73, 52) [73 and 52 Letter to Xiong Chunru], in: *Yan Fu ji* 严复集 [Yan Fu Collected Writings], ed. Wang Shi 王栻, Beijing 1986, pp. 690, 667–668.

of a foundation of authority in Western society. As a result, all the aforementioned thinkers could be seen as proponents of the belief that Confucianism could serve as a remedy for the ailments afflicting Western civilization, albeit for different reasons. Liang Qichao emphasized the significance of spiritual values and their impact on the human psyche, while Gu Hongming and Yan Fu emphasized the importance of sociopolitical ideals and their effectiveness in maintaining social order.

The cases of Liang Qichao and Yan Fu are noteworthy because they exemplify members of the intellectual elite who, upon witnessing the devastation wrought by World War I and the self-doubt among European thinkers, recognized that the difference between China and Europe was not merely a matter of degrees of development but rather a fundamental difference in nature. It was precisely because of this distinction that China could assume the role of a teacher to the West. This meant that the wisdom of Chinese sages was not limited to undeveloped thoughts the wisdom of Chinese sages was not merely a collection of undeveloped thoughts, appreciated only as precursors to Western philosophical systems, but rather possessed intrinsic merits. In other words, as an expression of a distinct culture, Chinese philosophy could aspire to possess universal value. Thus, the views of Liang Qichao and Yan Fu echoed those of Gu Hongming, who also emphasized the universal value of Confucian philosophy and its unique position as a philosophy capable of replacing religion.

Another perspective on the universal value of Chinese culture and its role in world history emerged from a younger thinker, Liang Shuming. During the second decade of the twentieth century, he pondered the specific characteristics that distinguish one civilization from another. His thoughts became public when he published his most significant work in 1921, titled "Eastern and Western Cultures and their Philosophies".²⁵

Liang Shuming argued that humanity has developed three major civilizations: Western, Chinese, and Indian. He contended that the key difference among these civilizations lies in the distinct attitudes or orientations of their respective people's wills. Western civilization emphasizes attacking and overcoming obstacles to progress, reshaping the environment according to its desires and needs. Chinese civilization focuses on adapting to the environment, while Indian civilization exhibits a tendency to disregard it altogether.

According to Liang's reasoning, these attitudes should naturally follow one another in the course of human development. He believed that under normal circumstances, human attitudes are determined by the most pressing needs at any given time. Thus, the Western civilization's attitude, characterized by its pursuit of material well-being, should develop first. Once the material needs of people are satisfied, the focus would shift to the importance of harmoniously managing interpersonal relations. This would align with the attitude characteristic of Chinese civilization. Eventually, as individuals live in material prosperity and a harmonious society, they would inevitably recognize the inevitability of suffering and develop compassion for all living beings. This compassionate outlook

²⁵ See: Liang Shuming 梁漱溟, *Zhongxi wenhua ji qi zhixue* 中西文化及其哲学 [Eastern and Western Cultures and their Philosophies], Changsha 2012.

would correspond to the Indian civilization's attitude, closely associated with embracing Buddhist teachings.

However, as the aforementioned thinker noted, history did not strictly follow this pattern. In China and India, there were sages who surpassed certain stages of development and entered more advanced phases without completing the less advanced ones. In China, it was Confucius who, through his genius, propelled Chinese culture forward, by emphasizing the significance of human relations even when the material needs of the people were not fully met. Similarly, in India, it was Buddha who, despite the lack of material progress, propelled Indian civilization towards the renouncement of the material world and the cultivation of compassion towards all living beings, representing the pinnacle of human civilization.

Liang Shuming put forth the argument that contemporary Chinese society finds itself in a unique situation where it must take a step back in order to move forward. In essence, he believed that Chinese civilization should learn from the West to fill in the developmental gap it missed due to the influence of Confucian teachings. Once this lower phase of development is complemented, Liang predicted that China could return to its Confucian culture, renew and revitalize it, and ultimately share it with the Western world. He asserted that this would be possible because Western societies are on the verge of completing the lower stage of human civilization and satisfying basic human needs. According to Liang's logic, they will soon be ready to devote their full attention to the issue of human relations, which are best managed and understood under the guidance of Confucian thought. In the meantime, he maintained that they must endure suffering, as the transformation from one stage of civilization to another is accompanied by social problems. These problems arise due to the lack of empathy and moral sense in European society, which, while developing machines, has become cold and insensitive, leading to the subordination and exploitation of the poor and workers, and resulting in social unrest and division.

Of course, Liang's interpretation of the history of human civilization is an oversimplification of complex historical and cultural processes. Indian culture cannot be reduced solely to Buddhism, especially when considering the influence of Hinduism and Islam on the Indian subcontinent. Similarly, explaining the richness of Chinese culture solely through the influence of Confucius is of limited value, as even the greatest cultural heroes never exist in a cultural vacuum. However, Liang Shuming's thoughts provide the Chinese people with a framework for understanding cultural differences that go beyond mere degrees of advancement in scientific or industrial civilization. These differences lie in culture and values that cannot be reduced to the state of development alone. In other words, readers of Liang's book come to understand that Western and Chinese people differ not only because the West represents China's future and China represents the Western past, but because they desire different things and hold different values. Consequently, one may conclude that Chinese culture is not something to be discarded while pursuing progress. On the contrary, progress should serve the values inherent to the culture. This perspective is compelling because if progress necessitates the destruction

of one's identity, one may legitimately question the meaning of progress altogether. In this context, as Philippe Mayor pointed out: "Liang's work can be read as an attempt to salvage the cultures of China and India from the anti-traditionalist modernization discourse of May Fourth, which promoted the complete modernization – a term seen as essentially synonymous with Westernization – of China²⁶".

It should be noted that Liang Shuming's ideas align with the earlier thoughts of Gu Hongming. Both thinkers asserted the value of Chinese culture as independent of the stage of material progress. Just like Liang, Gu Hongming argued that Confucian culture could assist Western societies in overcoming their structural civilizational problems. In this regard, they both stood in opposition to the main assumption of intellectuals associated with the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement, which stated that progress in the history of humankind follows only one pattern – the Western pattern – and that China must adopt the essential values and political ideals of Western civilization in order to be modern.

While Liang Shuming published his influential book, intellectuals associated with the *New Youth* magazine were already beginning to experience divisions. Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu can be seen as representative figures of these diverging groups. The distinction between them lay in their political views and involvement. Hu Shi advocated for pragmatic reforms and political freedoms, while Chen Duxiu became deeply involved in the Communist movement. However, both of them maintained a critical stance towards traditional Chinese culture and sought to replace its values by borrowing new ones from the West. It is important to note that as the West itself became divided into communist and anti-communist factions, so too did these intellectuals. While Gu Hongming remained a steadfast critic of Western civilization until the end of his life, Liang Shuming reconciled his views with the communists, stating that the establishment of a communist order would mark the completion of the first stage of China's development, after which the next stage – the Confucian one – would emerge²⁷.

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²⁶ Major, 'Tradition and Modernity', p. 464.

²⁷ See: Liang Shuming 梁漱溟, *Renxin yv rensheng* 人心与人生 [Human mind and human life], Guilin 2005.

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