

After contact with the industrialized nations of Western Europe and the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, intellectuals in the newly formed Republic of China began to debate the value of Western culture and how elements of it might fit in with traditional Chinese culture. Several Chinese scholars and educators discuss these issues in the following essays. Scholars Liang Qichao and Liang Shuming compare Eastern and Western cultures in broad terms. Philosopher and educator Hu Shi questions common conceptions held at the time about China and the West. In the fourth piece, written in 1935, academics call for the construction of a new modern culture that is still uniquely Chinese, a plan that Hu Shi critiques in the final essay.

Chinese Views of the West

Travel Impressions of Europe

By Liang Qichao

What is our duty? It is to develop our civilization with that of the West and to supplement Western civilization with ours so as to synthesize and transform them to make a new civilization....

Recently many Western scholars have wanted to import Asia civilization as a corrective to their own. Having thought the matter over carefully, I believe we are qualified for that purpose. Why? In the past, the ideal and the practical in Western civilization have been sharply divided. Idealism and materialism have both gone to the extreme. Religionists have onesidedly emphasized the future life. Idealistic philosophers have engaged in lofty talk about the metaphysical and mysterious, far, far removed from human problems. The reaction came from science. Materialism swept over the world and threw overboard all lofty ideals. Therefore I once said, "Socialism, which is so fashionable, amounts to no more than fighting for bread." Is this the highest goal of mankind?

Now pragmatism and evolutionism are being promoted, the aim being to embrace the ideal in the practical and to harmonize mind and matter. In my opinion, this is precisely the line of development in our ancient systems of thought. Although the schools of the sages—Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Mo Tzu—are different, their common goal is to unify the ideal and the practical.... Also, although Buddhism was founded in India, it really flourished in China.... Take Chinese Meditation Buddhism [Chan, Zen]. It can truly be considered as practical Buddhism and worldly Buddhism. Certainly it could have

developed only outside India, and certainly it can reveal the special characteristics of the Chinese people. It enables the way of renouncing the world and the way of remaining in the world to go hand in hand without conflict. At present philosophers like Bergson and Eucken want to follow this path but have not been able to do so. I have often thought that if they could have studied the works of the Buddhist Idealistic School, their accomplishments would surely have been greater, and if they could have understood Meditation Buddhism, their accomplishments would have been still greater.

Just think. Weren't the pre-Ch'in philosophers and the great masters of the Sui and the T'ang eras our loving and sagely ancestors who have left us a great heritage? We, being corrupted, do not know how to enjoy them and today we suffer intellectual starvation. Even in literature, art, and the rest, should we yield to others? Of course we may laugh at those old folks among us who block their own road of advancement and claim that we Chinese have all that is found in Western learning. But should we not laugh even more at those who are drunk with Western ways and regard everything Chinese as worthless, as though we in the last several hundred years have remained primitive and have achieved nothing? We should realize that any system of thought must have its own period as the background. What we need to learn is the essential spirit of that system and not the conditions under which it was produced, for once we come to the conditions, we shall not be free from the restrictions of time. For example, Confucius said a great deal about ethics of an aristocratic nature which is certainly not suitable today. But we should not take Confucius lightly simply because of this. Shall we cast Plato aside simply because he said that the slavery system should be preserved? If we understand this point, we can study traditional Chinese subjects with impartial judgment and accept or reject them judiciously.

There is another very important matter. If we want to expand our civilization, we must borrow the methods of other civilizations because their methods of study are highly refined. [As Confucius said]: "If one wants a job well done, he must first sharpen his tools." For what other reason was it [than the failure to do this] that while everyone in

the past read Confucius and Li Po, no one got anywhere? I therefore hope that our dear young people will, first of all, have a sincere purpose of respecting and protecting our civilization; secondly, that they will apply Western methods to the study of our civilization and discover its true character; thirdly, that they will put our own civilization in order and supplement it with others' so that it will be transformed and become a new civilization; and fourthly, that they will extend this new civilization to the outside world so that it can benefit the whole human race.

Eastern and Western Civilizations and Their Philosophies

By Liang Shuming

There are three ways in human life: 1) to go forward; 2) to modify and to achieve harmony, synthesis, and the mean in the self; and 3) to go backward.... The fundamental spirit of Chinese culture is the harmony and moderation of ideas and desires, whereas that of Indian civilization is to go backward in ideas and desires [and that of the West is to go forward].

Generally speaking, Westerners have been too strong and too vigorous in their minds and intellect. Because of this they have suffered spiritually. This is an undeniable fact since the nineteenth century.

Let us first compare Western culture with Chinese culture. First, there is the conquest of nature on the material side of Western culture—this China has none of. Second, there is the scientific method on the intellectual side of Western culture—this also China has none of. And thirdly, there is democracy on the social side of Western culture—this, too, China has none of.... This shows negatively that the way of Chinese culture is not that of the West but the second way [mentioned above, namely: achieving the mean].... As to Indian culture ... religion alone has flourished, subordinating to it philosophy, literature, science, and art. The three aspects of life [material, intellectual, and social] have become an abnormal spiritual development, and spiritual life itself has been an almost purely religious development. This is really most extraordinary. Indian culture

has traveled its own way, different from that of the West. Needless to say, it is not the same as that of Chinese culture.

In this respect Chinese culture is different from that of India, because of the weakness of religion as we have already said. For this reason, there is not much to be said about Chinese religions. The most important thing in Chinese culture is its metaphysics, which is applicable everywhere.... Chinese metaphysics is different from that of the West and India. It is different in its problems.... The problems discussed in the ancient West and ancient India have in fact not existed in China. While the problems of the West and India are not really identical, still they are the same in so far as the search for the reality of the universe is concerned. Where they are the same is exactly where they are decidedly different from China. Have you heard of Chinese philosophers debating monism, dualism, or pluralism, or idealism and materialism? The Chinese do not discuss such static problems of tranquil reality. The metaphysics handed down from the greatest antiquity in China, which constituted the fundamental concept of all learning—great and small, high and low—is that completely devoted to the discussion of change, which is entirely nontranquil in reality.

The first point of the Confucian philosophy of life arising out of this type of Chinese metaphysics is that life is right and good. Basically, this metaphysics speaks in terms of "the life of the universe." Hence it is said that "Change means reproduction and reproduction." Confucius said many things to glorify life, like "The great characteristic of Heaven and earth is to give life," and "Does Heaven speak? All the four seasons pursue their course and all things are continually being produced." ... Human life is the reality of a great current. It naturally tends toward the most suitable and the most satisfactory. It responds to things as they come. This is change. It spontaneously arrives at centrality, harmony, and synthesis. Hence its response is always right. This is the reason why the Confucian school said: "What Heaven has conferred is what we call human nature. To fulfill the law of human nature is what we call the Way." As long as one fulfills his nature, it will be all right. This is why it is said that it can be understood

and put into practice even by men and women of the simplest intelligence. This knowledge and ability are what Mencius called the knowledge possessed by man without deliberation and the ability possessed by him without having been acquired by learning. Today we call it intuition.

This sharp intuition is what Confucius called *ren* [humanity].... Therefore Confucius taught people to "seek *ren*." All human virtues come out of this intuition.... Only sharp intuition can enable man to be just right and good in his conduct, and *ren* can produce such a sharp intuition in the highest degree. *Ren* is the substance (*t'i*) and sharp intuition is the function (*yong*).... All that Confucianists have sought is a life that is just right. A life that is just right does not consist in rigidly following one particular objective law but in being natural and always achieving the right measure and degree [that is, the mean]. To be rigid surely cannot be just right, and its greatest harm is to hamper the inward springs of life and to violate the law of nature. The Confucianists have believed that a life that is just right is the most natural and most consonant with the changes of the universe—what Confucius called the "operation of the natural law." In this natural change, there is always centrality and harmony.

Clearly, contemporary Western thinkers demand a change in the traditional Western view of life. The tendency they seek is precisely the path of China, the path of Confucianism [namely, intuition or the Confucian *ren*].... The forward path of the West has been entirely devoted to the search for the external, completely casting aside the self and destroying the spirit, so that while the external life is rich and beautiful, the internal life is empty to the point of zero. Therefore Westerners now unanimously make a strenuous effort to rid themselves of the narrow and oppressive world which reason and intellection have imposed on them.... In the present world, intuition will rise to replace intellection.

What attitude should we Chinese hold now? What should we select from the three cultures? We may say:

1. We must reject the Indian attitude absolutely and completely.

2. We must accept Western culture as a whole [including conquest of nature, science, and democracy] but make some fundamental changes. That is to say, we must change the Western attitude somewhat [from intellection to intuition].
3. We must renew our Chinese attitude and bring it to the fore, but do so critically.

The attitude I want to recommend is what Confucius called "strength."... What I ask now is nothing more than our going forward to act, and that activity at its best should issue directly from our feelings.... When Confucius said that "to be strong, resolute, simple, and slow in speech is near to humanity," he revealed the nobility of the will of the individual and the richness of our feelings.

Our Attitude Toward Modern Western Civilization

By Hu Shi

At present the most unfounded and most harmful distortion is to ridicule Western civilization as materialistic and worship Eastern civilization as spiritual.... Modern civilization of the West, built on the foundation of the search for human happiness, not only has definitely increased material enjoyment to no small degree, but can also definitely satisfy the spiritual demands of mankind. In philosophy it has applied highly refined methods unceasingly to the search for truth and to investigation into the vast secrets of nature. In religion and ethics, it has overthrown the religion of superstitions and established a rational belief, has destroyed divine power and established a humanistic religion, has discarded the unknowable Heaven or Paradise and directed its efforts to building a paradise among men and Heaven on earth. It has cast aside the arbitrarily asserted transcendence of the individual soul, has utilized to the highest degree the power of man's new imagination and new intellect to promote a new religion and new ethics that is fully socialized, and has endeavored to work for the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people.

The most outstanding characteristic of Eastern civilization is to know contentment, whereas that of Western civilization is not to know contentment.

Contented Easterners are satisfied with their simple life and therefore do not seek to increase their material enjoyment. They are satisfied with ignorance and with "not understanding and not knowing" and therefore have devoted no attention to the discovery of truth and the invention of techniques and machinery. They are satisfied with their present lot and environment and therefore do not want to conquer nature but merely be at home with nature and at peace with their lot. They do not want to change systems but rather to mind their own business. They do not want a revolution, but rather to remain obedient subjects.

The civilization under which people are restricted and controlled by a material environment from which they cannot escape, and under which they cannot utilize human thought and intellectual power to change environment and improve conditions, is the civilization of a lazy and non-progressive people. It is truly a materialistic civilization. Such civilization can only obstruct but cannot satisfy the spiritual demands of mankind.

Declaration for Cultural Construction on a Chinese Basis

By Sa Mengwu, He Bingsong, and others

Some people think we should return to the past. But ancient China is already history, and history cannot and need not be repeated. Others believe that China should completely imitate England and the United States. These viewpoints have their special merits. But China, which is neither England nor the United States, should have her own distinctive characteristics. Furthermore, China is now passing from an agricultural feudal society to an industrial society, and is in a different situation from England and the United States, which have been completely industrialized. We therefore definitely oppose complete imitation of them. Besides the proponents of imitating England and the United States, there are two other schools of thought, one advocating imitation of Soviet Russia, the other, of Italy and Germany. But they make the same mistake as those

promoting the imitation of England and the United States; they likewise ignore the special spatial and temporal characteristics of China....

We demand a cultural construction on the Chinese basis. In the process of reconstruction, we should realize that:

1. China is China, not just any geographical area, and therefore has her own spatial characteristics. At the same time, China is the China of today, not the China of the past, and has her own temporal characteristics. We therefore pay special attention to the needs of here and now. The necessity to do so is the foundation of the Chinese basis.
2. It is useless merely to glorify ancient Chinese systems and thought. It is equally useless to curse them. We must examine our heritage, weed out what should be weeded out, and preserve what should be preserved. Those good systems and great doctrines which are worthy of praise should be brought to greater light with all our might and be presented to the whole world, while evil systems and inferior thoughts which are worthy of condemnation should be totally eliminated without the slightest regret.
3. It is right and necessary to absorb Western culture. But we should absorb what is worth absorbing and not, with the attitude of total acceptance, absorb its dregs also.
4. Cultural construction on the Chinese basis is a creative endeavor, one that is pushing ahead. Its objective is to enable China and the Chinese, who are backward and have lost their unique qualities in the cultural sphere, not only to keep pace with other countries and peoples, but also to make valuable contributions to a world culture.
5. To construct China in the cultural sphere is not to abandon the idea of the world as a Grand Unity. Rather, it is first to reconstruct China and make her a strong and complete unit so that she may have adequate strength to push forward the Grand Unity of the world.

Essentially speaking, China must have both self-recognition and a world perspective, and must have neither any idea of seclusion nor any determination to imitate blindly. Such recognition is profound and precise recognition. Proceeding on such recognition, our cultural reconstruction should be: Not to adhere to the past, nor to imitate blindly, but to stand on the Chinese basis, keep a critical attitude, apply the scientific method, examine the past, hold on to the present, and create the future.

Criticism of the "Declaration for Cultural Construction on a Chinese Basis"

By Hu Shi

At the beginning of the year ten professors, Sa Mengwu, He Bingsong, et al., issued a declaration on "cultural construction on a Chinese basis." Considerable popular attention in the country has been attracted to it in the last several months.... I can't help pointing out that while the ten professors repeatedly uttered the phrase "Chinese basis" and while they declared in so many words that they were "not conservatives," in reality it is their conservative thinking that has been fooling them. The declaration is a most fashionable expression of a reactionary mood prevalent today. Of course, it is out of fashion for people conscientiously to advocate returning to the past and therefore their conservative thinking takes refuge under the smoke-screen of compromise. With respect to indigenous culture, the professors advocated discarding the dregs and preserving the essence, and with respect to the new culture of the world they advocated accepting the good and rejecting the bad and selecting what is best. This is the most fashionable tune of compromise....

The fundamental error of Professors Sa, He, and others lies in their failure to understand the nature of cultural change.... Culture itself is conservative.... When two different cultures come into contact, the force of competition and comparison can partially destroy the resistance and conservatism of a certain culture.... In this process of survival of the fittest, there is no absolutely reliable standard by which to direct the selection from the various aspects of a culture. In this gigantic cultural movement, the "scientific

method" the ten professors dream of does not work.... There is always a limit to violent change in the various spheres of culture, namely, that it can never completely wipe out the conservative nature of an indigenous culture. This is the "Chinese basis" the destruction of which has been feared by numerous cautious people of the past as well as the present. This indigenous basis is found in the life and habits produced by a certain indigenous environment and history. Simply stated, it is the people—all the people. This *is* the "basis." There is no danger that this basis will be destroyed. No matter how radically the material existence has changed, how much intellectual systems have altered, and how much political systems have been transformed, the Japanese are still Japanese and the Chinese are still Chinese.... The ten professors need not worry about the "Chinese basis".... Those of us who are forward looking should humbly accept the scientific and technological world culture and the spiritual civilization behind it.... There is no doubt that in the future the crystallization of this great change will, of course, be a culture on the "Chinese basis."

Source: *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. de Bary, William Theodore, et al., eds. New York: Columbia University Press, 1960.¹

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