"Neither Standpatter nor Jacobin": Mei Guangdi’s Confucian Humanism

By

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Introduction

I. Introduction

In 2006, Chen Lai, the current director of the Qinghua Academy of Chinese Learning, published *Tradition and Modernity: a Humanist View*, which was translated into English in 2009. Recognizing “the significance of the tradition of Confucian values in contemporary society,” Chen concluded that “although classical Chinese culture with Confucianism as its mainstream had a religious nature, its culture essentially is humanism in kind.” Chen’s recognition of the role that “tradition” plays in “modernity” and his concept of Confucian humanism are far from new. Nine decades ago, under very different historical circumstances, a young Chinese student named Mei Guangdi (1890-1945) had already reached the same conclusions.

In the early twentieth century, China was moving towards a profound break with the values of Confucian tradition in its struggle towards modernization. With the Qing dynasty significantly weakened by internal stress and western imperial intervention, the reform movement of 1898 sought radical institutional changes to the imperial political order. The classical examination system was terminated in 1905, eliminating the traditional career path of Confucian scholars. Political support for Confucianism suffered a devastating blow with the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the end of China’s imperial system. The promised order of the national and constitutional Republic founded in 1912 soon degenerated into political chaos, which not only brought political disillusionment to many intellectuals, but also convinced them more fundamental changes were necessary. The New Culture Movement, starting in 1915 and reaching its zenith with the May Fourth demonstrations in 1919, campaigned for a ‘new culture’ of science and democracy while vehemently attacking “all relics of China’s feudal past.” As a result, “the authority of Confucianism and traditional ethics suffered a fundamental and devastating stroke and the new Western ideas were exalted.” By the late 1910s, the old institutions of Chinese society had fallen into such disarray that many wondered “what, if anything, can be salvaged from Chinese civilization?”

In one generation, many Chinese intellectuals had progressed from “the questioning of core traditional values to their total repudiation.” Mei Guangdi, though himself unwilling to discard tradition entirely, expressed the urgency of the crisis in terms of his more radical

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2 Chen, 255.
6 Huang, 142.
7 Furth, 13.
contemporaries would likely accept without controversy: “the question of life and death of Chinese culture is hanging in the balance at this critical moment.” Mei answered the existential crisis of Chinese culture with a brand of Confucianism refracted through the lens of American Humanism, a philosophical school prominent in the late 1920s United States. Mei championed against the tendency towards anti-traditionalism of the New Culture Movement in his heated debate with Hu Shi, former close friend and the leading intellectual in the New Culture Movement, in 1916 and through the establishment of the journal, Xueheng (学衡 Critical Review), in 1922.

Until recently, Mei’s reputation has been one of a narrow-minded cultural reactionary who opposed a progressive New Culture Movement. This impression is due in large part to Hu Shi’s seminal article, “Bi Shang Liangshan (Forced into outlawry: the beginning of the literary revolution).” Most readers came away with an image of Mei as a diehard conservative. Hu claimed that Mei was responsible for radicalizing Hu’s own ideas, and yet Hu acknowledged Mei’s “moderating influence.” Because of Mei, Hu ultimately tempered his provocative language of “literary revolution” and adopted the more modest language of “humble Proposals.” While Hu Shi’s article unfairly tarred Mei’s reputation for most of the twentieth century, if not for that article Mei possibly would not even be remembered today.

In the 1990s, scholars started “reevaluating the Xueheng school.” In an article published in English in 2001, Yu Ying-Shih took a closer look at what Hu chose to quote from Mei’s letters, placing the excerpts in the context of the complete letters, and concluded that “there can be little doubt that Mei has been made a villain of the literary revolution by being quoted out of context” and that Mei was “no less critical and no less Westernized than his ‘progressive’ rivals.” Indeed, Hu Shi’s and Mei Guangdi’s differing views on what to do about China can be traced in part to their differing American sources of influence. While Hu Shi chose the tutelage of pragmatist John Dewey (1859-1952), Mei chose the guidance of Irving Babbitt (1865-1933), the most prominent founder of New Humanism.

Mei Guangdi was the first Chinese disciple of Irving Babbitt. Mei studied with him from 1916 to 1919. Among Babbitt’s Chinese students, Mei was recognized for having gained the deepest understanding of his mentor’s thinking. Mei was also credited for in turn influencing Babbitt by introducing him to Confucian concepts. During Mei’s time at Harvard University, Mei actively recruited other Chinese students to study under Babbitt. Mostly in 1916, Mei also engaged Hu Shi in a heated debate over the objectives of “literary revolution.” Upon his return to China, Mei significantly contributed to the establishment of the journal Xueheng in 1922 and the

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13 Huaiqing Duan, Xin renwen zhuyi sichao: Baibide zai Zhongguo (Nanchang: Jiangxi gaoxiao chubanshe, 2009), 8.
14 Hou, 8.
formation of the so-called “Xueheng School,” based at the Southeast University, which opposed the New Culture Movement based at Beijing University.

By the early 1920s, the new generation of Chinese intellectuals had already split into a leftist wing and a liberal wing.\(^{15}\) Coming late to the debate, the Xueheng scholars opposed the views of intellectuals like Hu Shi on tradition and cultural importation from the West while constructively advocating American Humanism in a Chinese context. While Mei’s contribution to the intellectual ferment of the May Fourth era\(^{16}\) is often overlooked, this essay attempts to begin to correct that judgment. As we shall see, Mei was a critical historical figure in understanding the interaction between American Humanism and Chinese thinking, the propagation of Humanism in China, and, by his opposition to many of the positions of the New Culture Movement, helped frame the debate and forced his intellectual opponents to clarify their thinking.

Hou Chien, a disciple of Liang Shiqiu and a promotor of American Humanism in Taiwan, in his doctoral dissertation, *Irving Babbitt in China* (1980), points out the significance of the Xueheng scholars: “Their most important achievement is that they have kept alive certain issues, issues on which may still hinge the future of the Chinese nation…”\(^{17}\) As “the first modern Chinese conservative”\(^{18}\) and “the spiritual leader”\(^{19}\) of Xueheng, Mei foresaw the potential dangers of such modern ills as materialism, radicalism, and utilitarianism, issues that remain extremely relevant to present-day China.

II. Existing Scholarship and the Necessity of the Study

Scholarship on Mei Guangdi has been limited, for two reasons: First, in the dominant discourse of the May Fourth Movement, Mei, deemed an opponent of the New Culture Movement, has been marginalized and his influence has been typically deemed insignificant. Second, research into Mei’s work suffers from both the paucity and the limited availability of Mei’s writings, some of which were lost during the War of Resistance against Japan. Illness and poor living conditions during that war led to his early death in 1945 at the age of fifty-five, four months after the surrender of Japan. Mei was not an especially prolific writer, and surviving source material on Mei in both Chinese and English has been scattered across the People’s Republic of China, Taiwan, and the United States.

Existing studies of Mei mostly evaluate him in terms of his opposition to the New Culturists and over-emphasize his conservatism. For example, Berkeley student Richard Rosen’s pioneering study of Mei, *The National Heritage Opposition to the New Culture and Literary Movements of China in the 1920’s*, written in 1969 at the height of the Chinese Cultural

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\(^{16}\) In *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*, Chow Tse-tsung defined the time frame for the May Fourth Movement as from 1917-1921. Given that Xueheng was established in 1922, the use of the term May Fourth Movement in this study is in a broader sense.

\(^{17}\) Hou, 170.


Revolution (1966-1976), paired Mei with his key intellectual adversary, Hu Shi, analyzing their differing differences. Rosen argued that the conservatives of the Xueheng School were “thorough national conservatives” who sought to defend “the national heritage” of China, which Rosen identified as “her enormous history of traditional literature.” Yu Ying-shih’s previously mentioned article examined Mei’s correspondence with Hu Shi, concluding that “conservative” critics such as Mei should be considered part of the May Fourth Movement in order to better capture the movement’s “multidimensionality and multidirectionality”.

Huang Xingtao’s article, “On Cultural Conservative Mei Guangdi (1991),” is typical of this application of the “cultural conservative” label to Mei. Attempting to identify the roots of the intellectual duel between Mei and Hu Shi, Huang argues that it arose from Mei’s desire to defend a Chinese tradition that Huang characterized as the legacy of Confucius and Mencius. Huang concludes that Mei’s thoughts are essentially ti-yong (Chinese essence/Western function), cloaked in modern garb. Zhou Gang’s thesis on Mei Guangdi, written in 2007, echoes Huang’s conclusions.


While few scholars devoted much attention to Mei’s distinctive thoughts on Confucianism, in a 1977 conference, Hou Chien asserted that Mei’s firm belief in Confucianism was Mei’s most significant contribution to Chinese intellectual history and that Mei’s advocacy anticipated the later revival of Confucianism.

In contrast to studies inclined to view Mei through the lens of the New Culturists, thereby relegating Mei to a mere intellectual adversary of Hu Shi, this thesis examines Mei in his own terms; namely, as an independent humanist seeking the middle way as the essence of his cultural thinking. Adopting this perspective helps answer the question of why, despite the fervent desire

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20 Yu, 313-320.
23 Hou, vi.
25 Wang, 268.
to “save” China that Mei shared with contemporary cultural radicals, Mei chose to bitterly attack
the New Culturists and to turn quite consciously to China’s past to find inspiration for China’s
future.

Furthermore, whereas most scholars emphasized the impact of Irving Babbitt on Mei, this
study credits Mei for his active role in choosing to embrace Babbitt’s ideas. This study views
Mei’s intellectual development as occurring in two distinct stages, highlighting Mei’s intellectual
predispositions prior to his encounter with Babbitt while confirming Hou Chien’s and Edward
Wang’s conclusion on the role that Babbitt and American Humanism played on the logic of his
cultural views.

Furthering the effort of Ong Chang Woei in identifying the uniqueness of Xueheng,27 this
thesis provides a much more detailed account of Mei’s distinctive contribution to the intellectual
life of the New Culture period despite Mei’s limited output. This approach simultaneously
decenters the May Fourth Movement by illustrating the heterogeneity of views within the so-
called “conservative” camp, confirming Yu’s emphasis on the diversity of thought within the
May Fourth Movement.

This paper benefits from the expanded availability of materials on Mei Guangdi.28 It
utilizes the newly available academic records of Mei in the United States, the newly available
articles Mei published in various journals, his forty-five pieces of correspondence with Hu Shih
available since 1994, the Writing of K. T. Mei published in Taiwan in 1980, and the Memoir of
his wife, Ida Lee Mei, Flash-backs of a running soul: Running, running, and running, over rocks, hils, and valleys, but thou art with me (title original in English), published in Taiwan in 1984.

These primary sources have limitations in portraying Mei’s cultural thinking. First,
although this study is based on enhanced availability of primary sources, the number and quality
of sources remains limited. The representation of Mei’s ideas is occasionally vague, partially due
to the limited number of available primary sources and partially resulting from the vagueness in
his own writing, a problem I address in the last chapter. As a result, often we can only grasp
the frame of Mei’s mindset rather than insight into his specific ideas. In addition, Mei often failed to
date his crucial correspondence with Hu Shih, making it difficult to reconstruct the chronology of
his intellectual predisposition.29 The years in which these letters were written have to be
determined by comparing the events described with Mei’s activities or with the content of Hu
Shi’s diary during the same period.30 In the cases that the years of the letters remain unknown,
this study accepts of the sequence of the numbering on the original copies of the correspondence
as the chronology of Mei’s intellectual development.

28 Guangdi Mei, Mei Guangdi wenben, ed. Tieshan Mei (Wuhan: Huazhong Shifan University Press, 2011) was published in April, 2011. The new primary source contained in this book that was not used in this thesis mainly
includes two lecture notes for Mei’s classes of the introduction to literature and the literary trends in modern Europe
and America. Since this author obtained the book in the late stage of her work and the lecture notes do not contradict
the conclusion of this thesis, this author chose not to make further changes to the draft except for quotation No. 124. See the appendix for the complete list of Mei’s writings used in this study.
III. The Thesis

The thesis consists of four chapters. Following a brief biography of Mei Guangdi that situates him within his historical context, the first chapter explores why Mei was so strongly attracted to Babbitt’s humanism. I propose two stages in Mei’s intellectual development, taking his encounter with the thinking of Irving Babbitt in 1914 or 1915 as the major turning point. Chapter One will analyze Mei’s correspondence with his then intimate friend, Hu Shi, in order to get a sense of Mei’s intellectual propensities in the “pre-Babbitt” stage of his cultural thinking. And finally, after a general overview of American Humanism, I will argue that the Confucian Mei found both intellectual intimacy and inspiration in Babbitt’s Humanism, suggesting that Mei’s preexisting cultural views corresponded closely with Babbitt’s mature thinking.

In the second chapter, I argue that the middle way approach stands for the essence of Mei’s cultural thinking. I demonstrate how American Humanism reinforced Mei’s intellectual predispositions and influenced Mei’s cultural thinking and practice. I first illustrate American Humanism enabled Mei to find common ground in the humanist traditions of the East and West as a driving force in his culturally syncretistic vision for China’s modernization. Second, I will argue that American Humanism supplied him with a certain theoretical authority as well as the rationale that he used in his critiques of the New Culturists. It examines how Mei used literature, the carrier of the tradition, as a way of defending Confucian humanism, and how Mei employed the discourse of Babbitt’s Humanism to achieve their shared goal of revitalizing Confucianism in modern China. In the concluding part of Chapter Two, I link the previous two sections and reach the conclusion that Mei attempted to find a middle path answering the challenges of the day. I also respond to the current scholarship on Mei in this section, arguing that Mei’s approach was neither ti-yong nor anti-modernization.

Chapter Three compares and contrasts Mei’s thinking with Liang Qichao’s and Liang Shuming’s, both of whom have been, like Mei, commonly labeled “cultural conservatives.” The comparisons will highlight the leitmotifs shared by “conservative” intellectuals of the May Fourth Era, suggesting that they were all products of an age of crisis in which the core of the Chinese traditional system was disintegrating from internal distress and the assault of western modernity. The wide range of cultural views and opinions held by these “conservative” intellectuals illustrates just how misleading and simplistic it is to use the broad label of “cultural conservative” to describe Mei and the others. The contrasts among these “conservatives” will serve to underscore the distinctiveness of Mei’s cultural thinking.

In Chapter Four, I will evaluate Mei’s achievements and his historical significance while acknowledging the weaknesses in Mei’s thinking, in particular his inconsistencies and propensity toward vagueness.
Chapter One: The Confucian Mei Encountering American Humanism

I. Introduction: The Life of Mei Guangdi

Mei Guangdi (1890-1945) spent the formative years of his intellectual development in both his native China and as a student in the United States.\(^{31}\) He was born on February 14, 1890, in Xuancheng, Anhui province. Mei grew up in the final years of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) when traditional Confucian society was in deep and rapid flux. Mei purportedly could recite the Four Books at the age of five.\(^{32}\) Although this anecdote incorporates a trope of conventional Chinese portraits of outstanding historical figures, the fact that Mei garnered his Xiucai degree by passing the county level imperial examination at the age of twelve speaks to an impressive precocity. However, the classical examination system was abolished in 1905 when Mei was fifteen, rendering his credentials outmoded; if the old political system had not collapsed, Mei’s training in the Confucian classics would have set him on the traditional career path of becoming a civil servant.

Acutely aware that the old order had shattered, Mei took advantage of the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship, established by the American Government using monetary reparations paid by Qing Dynasty for the Boxer Rebellion in 1900,\(^{33}\) to study in the United States. In 1909, Mei went to the Qinghua Preparatory school to prepare for the examination designed to select winners of the scholarship. He failed on his first attempt in 1910, but succeeded on his second. That Mei was not discouraged by his initial failure suggests how highly Mei valued the opportunity of studying in the United States. Passing the exam placed Mei among a small privileged group of Chinese students who benefited from the opportunity to receive a modern foreign education.

For the next eight years, from 1911 to 1919, Mei studied in three universities in the United States. From 1911 to 1913, he studied at the University of Wisconsin; while he declined to declare a major, political science and history dominated his choice of classes and notably, Mei did not take a single science class. Mei possessed a strong sense of responsibility, positioning himself as a pioneer for the future Chinese scholarship. “Born into this age, our generation

\(^{31}\) The biographical information of Mei come from the following sources:
2. Guangdi Mei, Letters of K. T. Mei: whose life-goal was harmony of the best in the East and the West (Taipei: China Academy, 1980).
4. Mei’s academic records in the United States

\(^{32}\) Rosen, 3.

\(^{33}\) Jerome B. Grieder explained on the origin of the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship: “The most generous and reliable source of government support for students in the United States was the Boxer Indemnity fund, established in 1908 by Congressional action which authorized President Roosevelt to lop more than US$10 million off the United States’ original share of the Boxer Indemnity imposed in 1901, with the stipulation that the sum remitted be used to endow educational programs. Forty-seven Boxer Indemnity students arrived in the United States in 1909… Two years later, Tsing Hua College was established in Peking, supported by Indemnity funds, as a preparatory school for students who aspired to continued education in the United States.” See Jerome B. Grieder, Intellectuals and the State in Modern China (New York: the Free Press, 1983), 211.
shoulders the heavy responsibility because the scholarship of our country all depends on us to start.” Mei ambitiously desired an interdisciplinary study: “I plan in the following four years to focus on politics along with history, and literature; ... then incorporate philosophy and find a sage to guide me...” Mei intended to become a world scholar “aiming at incorporating diverse scholarships.” He initially struggled with English; but even as he struggled, he simultaneously took additional language classes in French and German. He seems to have quickly realized the impossibility of studying two foreign languages at one time and so dropped German from his studies in the following semester.

The first two years study in the United States was a difficult period for Mei. Having gained recognition in the traditional Chinese educational system, Mei stood out among the fellow overseas students. Bringing many Chinese classics along to study in the United States made him appear foreign among his cohorts, which in combination with his poorly prepared English, earned Mei a mocking nickname of “anachronistic pedant (laoxuejiu).” While taking pride in his possession of the Chinese classics, Mei held “contempt” towards those who drifted away from Chinese learning. Lived almost in seclusion, Mei deemed his Wisconsin days as “the darkest and most miserable time in my life.”

Mei’s interest in history continued after transferring to the College of Liberal Arts at Northwestern University where he studied from 1913 to 1915, eventually graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in History with a minor in English. Majoring in history rather than a science-related major was unusual among his contemporary overseas Chinese students. Since the turn of the century, Chinese students generally abandoned the humanities and social sciences in favor of science, which they considered “a value system, not just a subject matter of study.” In fact, in 1914, only 0.3 percent of the Chinese students in the United States studied history; by contrast, 30.8 percent of these students majored in engineering. Mei’s close friend at the time, Hu Shi majored in agriculture at Cornell University from 1910 to 1912.

“Yearning for something in modern Western literature more virile and levelheaded to reconcile with the old Confucian traditions (original in English),” Mei pondered possible scenarios for culturally reconstructing China even as he devoted himself to his American education. It was at Northwestern University that Mei first encountered the work of Irving Babbitt. After devouring all three of Babbitt’s books, Mei made the life-changing decision to transfer to Harvard. He recalled later: “Probably my chief purpose in coming to Cambridge in the fall of 1915 was to in order to sit at the feet of this new sage (original in English).”

34 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 127.
35 Ibid., 121.
36 Ibid., 126.
37 Wang, 265.
38 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 141, 153. Wang, 266.
39 Mei, Ibid., 153.
40 Wang, 266.
41 Min-Chih Chou, Hu Shih and Intellectual Choice in Modern China (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1984); 8.
44 Ibid.
In 1915, Mei enrolled in the Modern Language Division of the Graduate School of Arts and Science at Harvard. The classes he took over the next four years demonstrate Mei’s faith in Irving Babbitt and his brand of Humanism. Roughly two-thirds of Mei’s classes were related to themes important to the New Humanism. In his first year at Harvard, Mei did not rush into any class of his much admired professor (even though one on the Beginnings of the Romantic Movement would have been available), but instead focused his studies on the key figures in Babbitt’s books: Bacon, Tolstoy, Emerson, and the Sentimentalists.

In 1916, Mei became Babbitt’s first Chinese student. Quickly becoming an ardent crusader for the application of Humanism to a Chinese context, Mei subsequently recruited Wu Mi, Tang Yongtong, Lou Guanglai, and Zhang Xinhai to study under Babbitt. Over the next three years, Mei took every course that Babbitt offered: Literary Criticism since the Sixteenth Century; The Romantic Movement in the Nineteenth Century; and Rousseau and his Influence.

In the same year, Mei and Hu Shi heatedly debated the question of how a “literary revolution” should be carried out to culturally reconstruct China. What began as a deep friendship and a shared vision of cultural revolution, soon devolved into estranged tension as their conflicting visions of China’s modernity grew ever more polarized.

Mei left the United States in 1919. The China he left behind in 1911 and the China he faced in 1919 were very different. The Qing dynasty and a two-millennia old imperial system had collapsed in 1911. The new Republic founded in 1912 had become politically divided and degenerated into warlordism. Hu Shi returned China in 1917, two years ahead of Mei, and had gained “a national reputation as an intellectual leader” first with his advocacy of “literary revolution” and then with his campaign for a critical examination of Chinese cultural tradition.

Mei first worked as the chairman of the English Department at Nankai University in Tianjin, and then served in the same position at Southeast University where Liang Qichao was a colleague.

In 1922, while based at Southeast University, Mei sought to challenge his intellectual adversaries based at Beijing University by helping give birth to a scholarly journal, Xueheng (Critical Review). However, Southeast University was horribly divided due to differing visions concerning education and conduct of the affairs of the university. The Xueheng circle remained “a minority,” so after the November 1923 death of their crucial supporter, Vice-President Liu Boming, the major members of the group, Low Guanglai and Wu Mi were forced to resign and teach in other universities. “Apprehensive of coming disaster,” Mei also resigned, accepted an offer from Harvard and sailed to the United States in 1924. From 1924 to 1936, except for a brief sojourn in China, Mei worked at Harvard as an Assistant Professor of Chinese and helped

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45 Graduate School of Arts and Sciences record card (transcript) for Kuang-Ti Mei of Harvard University (Call number UAV 161.272.5, File I)
48 Wang, 268.
49 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 46.
51 Ibid.
to develop the Chinese Library at Harvard University. By the time he returned China in 1936, Mei had spent nearly half of his adult life, about twenty years, in the United States.

Back in China, Mei served first as Associate Dean then later as Dean of the Faculty of Letters of National Zhejiang University. Starting in 1938, Mei served four terms in the People’s Council of the Nationalist Government. After the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese war, Mei migrated with the University to Guiyang. In a diary entry for February, 1945, Mei recorded an ambitious writing plan for future scholarly works. He planned to write in both Chinese and English, indicating his intention to serve as a two-way cultural bridge between East and West, which is well accorded to his teacher’s wish. “The West needs a more adequate interpretation that it has yet received of the Confucian humanism and this is… a task that I am fond of urging upon …[the] Chinese who know their own cultural background and have at the same time a good knowledge of English.” On Christmas Day, 1945, Mei was baptized. Three days later, he died, leaving his ambitious scholarly projects unrealized.

II. Predisposed and Ripe for Transplant

Mei’s introduction to Irving Babbitt’s Humanism in 1914/1915 marks the beginning of the second stage in his cultural thinking. Mei’s private correspondence with Hu Shi in 1911-1915 reveals that he had already developed his essential intellectual propensities. Frustrated by the current course of Chinese history and ill at ease in American society, Mei turned to Confucian tradition, literature, and cultural syncretism in hope of saving China. The essential humanism of Mei’s Chinese classical education laid the foundation for Mei’s future intellectual development and also begins to explain why Mei ultimately chose to embrace Babbitt’s American Humanism as opposed to other western ideologies.

The image of Mei revealed in his letters to Hu Shi appears to be that of an ambitious young man who, in his identification with his home country, felt humiliated by China’s current condition and carried a strong sense of responsibility for “saving the nation.” Soon after his arrival in the United States in 1911, Mei disclosed to Hu Shi his approach to saving China. In a letter written in 1911 that discussed the Confucianism of Yan Yuan (颜元 1635-1704) and Li Gong (李塨 1659-1733), Mei wrote: “we talk about restoring China’s ancient cultural values (复古, fu gu, italics mine) day after day, believing the learners of the last two thousand years did not understand the meaning of the ancient learning (古学, gu xue, italics mine)… It is fortunate that Yan and Li overthrew the false learning and took restoring the ancient as the subject of learning (yi fu gu wei xue). To save the country through the ancient learning, shouldn’t we learn from them?” In another letter, he encouraged Hu Shi to become “a great man of revitalizing the ancient learning.” The phrases “restoring the ancient (fu gu)” and “the ancient learning (gu xue)” signal Mei’s propensity to look back in history to find solutions for the problems of the

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52 Mei, Letters, xxiii.
54 Wu, 14.
55 Wu, 14.
56 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 115.
57 Ibid., 113, 116.
58 Ibid., 122.
present and future. Mei was clearly counting on a rejuvenation of “the old” as the best approach to revitalizing China.

For Mei, “the old” primarily referred to Confucianism as represented by his reading of Confucius, though he also admired such later Confucians as Mencius, Yan Yuan, and Zeng Guofan. Responding to Hu’s contention that Confucius did not create liu yi (六艺, the six arts), Mei expressed his admiration for Confucius in 1911: “I believe Confucius represents the achievements of the sages. He compiled the Classics and he was a great educator. Therefore, in regard to the ancient scholarship, we all trace the origins to Confucius. What is wrong with it?”

In a letter written in 1913, Mei revealed his infallible faith in Confucius: “I have read some books of philosophy recently. Comparing Confucius with others, I am increasingly convinced of his greatness, believing he should be ranked first, in all ages, east or west.” Attempting to change Hu Shi’s unfavorable views of Yan Yuan and Li Gong, Mei claimed that “the two can truly reflect Confucius and Mencius.”

Confronting the decline of Confucianism, Mei points out in 1913 that “the means of our reform (改良) lies in seeking the original meaning. The original meaning contains deep philosophy that can apply to the present. The misunderstanding and corruption of Confucianism has … reached an extreme. The revitalization of Confucianism needs people who are good at reading and interpretation.” In many ways, Mei’s reform program appears to resemble that of the New Text Confucianism of Kang Youwei (1858-1927), who advocated reform by means of reinterpreting “original” Confucianism.

Mei’s religiously-colored conception of Confucianism also strongly suggests that he was influenced by New Text Confucianism. Kang Youwei and Tan Sitong (1865-1898) both claimed that Confucianism had a “religious” character. Kang inaugurated his famous campaign to make Confucianism into a state religion in 1895 and pursued it until the death of Yuan Shikai (1859-1916) in 1916. After 1911, a network of Confucian societies on the provincial level came into being. From 1912 to 1914, Kang campaigned for making Confucianism an integral part of the republican constitution.

In the historical context of 1912, the year when the Republic of China was established, Mei wrote that “now the political question of our country has already been solved. What needs to be settled next is the question of religion (宗教, italic mine).” Thereafter Mei mainly focused on the development of Confucianism and the denunciation of san gang (三纲, the three bonds) of the Southern Song scholars. Mei concluded that “The fact that Confucianism is unpopular in our country is not the fault of Confucius, but of subsequent ‘scholars.’” Mei’s description of the development of religion in China reveals that he identified Confucianism as a religion rather than secular belief system. Drawing parallels between Confucianism and Christianity, Mei proposed a

59 Ibid., 113, 116.
60 The year 1913 was determined by the comparison of the classes he mentioned in the letter and his academic record.
61 Ibid., 123.
62 Ibid., 115.
63 Ibid., 123.
64 Furth, 56-59.
65 Ibid., 57.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 133.
syncetic solution to the question of religion in the same letter: “the responsibility of our generation at present is to elucidate genuine Confucianism and the commonality of Confucianism and Christianity. It will on the one hand eliminate the hostility of our people towards Christianity while eliminating the foreigner’s hostility towards Confucianism. Combining the two religions together will solve the problem of religion in our country.”

As previously noted, Mei blamed later Confucians for the current disdain in which Confucianism was held. In fact, Mei was so thoroughly alienated by the historical practices of Confucianism that he was fully prepared to depart from its two thousand year tradition. In a letter written in 1911, he declared that the terror of the despotic rule of Qin Shihuang utterly undermined the authentic teaching of Confucius, making Confucian learning in the Qin and Han dynasties irrelevant. Mei complained that the Confucians of the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279) such as Zhu Xi (1130-1200) focused on metaphysics and meditation, further removing Confucian teachings from the practical concerns of daily life. Thus, he concluded that only when the learning of Han and Song was overthrown, could authentic Confucianism be restored. On the whole, Mei’s portrait of the Chinese Confucian tradition appears oversimplified. Commenting on Mei’s understanding of Chinese tradition, Hou Chien pointed out that Mei was “merely a traditionally trained Chinese scholar acquainted only with the most orthodox and rudimentary matter…” Mei again resembles Kang Youwei in rejecting most of the historical practices of Confucianism while seeking to understand the direct teachings of Confucius. Unlike Kang, however, Mei had little attachment to the Qing dynasty, as he was a member of Nanshe (南社 Southern Society), a loosely organized anti-Manchu literary group established in 1909.

Mei’s admiration of the doctoral dissertation of Kang Youwei’s disciple Chen Huanzhang (陈焕章 1880-1933), the Economic Principles of Confucius and His School, published in 1911, further reveals a reformist stance similar to Kang Youwei’s. According to Mei, Chen “constructed his thesis following Kang Youwei’s teachings; he reread and reinterpreted the Chinese classics in order to advocate new politics and to initiate institutional reforms (tuo gu gaizhi); then he extolled the virtues of Western knowledge to promote these reforms (fang yang gaizhi).” Calling Chen’s work “an amazing book,” Mei concluded that the book “contains numerous truths of Confucianism” and lauded it for “outperforming a generation (推倒一世).” Mei was convinced that “Chen is truly a Confucian hero. Once a society for the study of Confucius is established, Mr. Chen will be able to make his contribution.” Mei’s prediction came true: Chen established the Confucian Society (Kongjiaohui) in 1912 and served as its Director after graduating from Columbia University. While Mei’s positive comments on Chen and his work are general and lacking in detail, the absence of negative comment underscores Mei’s adherence to Chen and Kang Youwei’s reformist agenda.

For Mei, literature offered the means to revitalize Confucianism. In presumably 1913, before he transferred to Northwestern University, Mei first identified his interest in literature: “in

69 Ibid., 134.
70 Ibid., 139, 141.
71 Hou, 66.
73 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 136.
74 Ibid., 135.
the past two years, I always desire to write well in both Chinese and English.... My ambition in this life is to change society through literature and I desire neither to become a civil servant nor to become rich.” In 1913, after his transfer to Northwestern University, Mei expressed a similar goal: “I desire to become a literary man capable of writing, taking action, and convey[ing] truths” (wen yi zai dao, Mei’s later English translation). The phrasing is suggestive; Mei seems to have been influenced by the dominant nineteenth century literary school of Tong-cheng, whose essential principle was wen yi zai dao.

Responding to Hu Shi’s contempt for literary men, Mei wrote in 1914: “I believe Zhang Taiyan and Wang Jingwei’s contribution to the cause of revolution of our country is larger than that of Sun Yet-sun and Huang Xing. Without writers such as Rousseau and Voltaire, there would have been no French Revolution!” All four men that Mei referenced were revolutionaries who joined the Tongmenghui (Revolutionary Alliance), established in 1905 in Japan. Mei deemed the literary work of men like Zhang Taiyan (1869-1936), who edited Minbao (People’s Journal) for fifteen issues, and Wang (1883-1944), who served as the journal’s editor in chief, as far more influential than any other actions they took.

Mei’s writings reveal a strong intellectual orientation towards cultural syncretism. On March 5, 1912, he wrote: “Born into present-day China, we carry the heavy responsibility of scholarship. Regarding national study, we need to correct the erroneous scholarship of the last two thousand years; regarding western learning, we should study the origin of its culture and the cause of its prosperity. For us, it would be most satisfying to synthesize the two into one.” Hence, at the age of twenty-two, Mei had already developed his essential approach to cultural synthesis, an intellectual propensity that would persist in all his future thinking.

For Mei, cultural syncretism was a two-way street. As eager as he was to bring western perspectives to China, he also wanted to spread Chinese learning to the West. Freshly arrived in America in 1911, Mei wrote to Hu Shi that: “our greatest responsibility is to propagate our books so that white people can read our books directly and learn that we have a great and glorious civilization. Their contempt for us would then change to respect. Our sages of several thousand years should become just as famous in the world as their white sages.”

Even though Mei was more than willing to learn from the West, he was markedly unimpressed by contemporary American society. While acknowledging western material achievement, he was struck by “the wide spread-political incompetence, the social unrest, the intellectual confusion, and the spiritual anarchy” of the United States. The dark side of

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75 Ibid., 148.
76 Ibid., 149. “Humanism and Modern China,” 371-372.
77 Ibid., 150.
80 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 120.
81 Ibid., 117.
82 Feuerwerker, 143.
83 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 366.
American society clearly affected his thoughts on China’s future. Mei concluded that they should seek a better future for China than what had developed in the U.S.\textsuperscript{84}

During this period, Mei still held a sinocentric view of the world. He was convinced that although the material civilization (\textit{wuzhi wenming}) of the United States was superior, its moral civilization (\textit{daode wenming}) was truly inferior to China’s.\textsuperscript{85} While acknowledging the scholarly achievement of the Greeks and Romans, Mei asserted that pre-Qin scholarship was even greater and merited more attention.\textsuperscript{86} Only later, after embracing Humanism, would Mei’s sinocentric proclivities change.

Mei initially approached Christianity in 1912 as part of his larger purpose of finding possible solutions to China’s problems. At first, he was utterly disdainful of the Bible, yet after attending a World Youth conference, Mei became convinced that Christianity and Confucianism indeed belonged to the same family, which, interestingly, reinforced his confidence in Confucianism.\textsuperscript{87} Because he already saw Confucianism as a religion, and even though, at the time, he must have had only a rudimentary understanding of Christianity, he must have found sufficient commonalities between Christianity and Confucianism to accept Christianity with relative ease. Although he firmly believed in the value of Confucianism, Mei’s need to enlist the support of western authority hints at some lingering deeper insecurity.

Mei looked to the historical development of Christianity for guidance in how to reform Confucianism. He paid particular attention to Martin Luther’s role in reforming Christianity by reinterpreting Christianity’s foundational texts in light of Christianity’s sixteenth century conditions. Luther’s reforms targeted Christianity’s institutions. Mei argued that to revitalize Confucianism, three issues were crucial: “new interpretation, leadership and organization (original in English)”\textsuperscript{88} He was convinced that these three factors contributed to the prosperity of Christianity. Finding inspiration in the perceived success of Christianity, Mei played with the idea of establishing a Confucian Society as an engine of comparable Chinese reforms, claiming that he was willing to commit his life to this purpose. Mei’s cultural borrowings were, however, not without limit: he argued that the Chinese should absorb the reforming spirit of Christianity but not allow it to replace Confucianism as China’s religion.\textsuperscript{89} Mei’s approach to Christianity to find a solution for China’s crisis reveals a pattern that would be repeated in his later approach to western civilization in general. His tendency towards finding commonalities between Chinese and western cultures, enlisting support from the west to confirm his own faith in Confucianism, discovering guidance and inspiration from the western experience, and advocating limited cosmopolitanism became the key traits of his cultural thinking.

Mei’s writing and correspondence from this period make clear that he wanted to revitalize Confucianism in order to save China, and that literature was the essential means to achieve that goal. What was not clear to him, however, was how to go about his mission. As an ambitious young man living in a foreign country, Mei needed guidance. He found it in the works of Irving Babbitt. Mei recalled his initial encounter with the thoughts of Babbitt: “I first learned

\begin{footnotes}
\item[84] Mei, \textit{Mei Guangdi}, 146.
\item[85] Ibid., 124.
\item[86] Ibid., 130.
\item[87] Ibid., 132.
\item[88] Ibid., 124.
\item[89] Ibid., 150.
\end{footnotes}
of Irving Babbitt through a chance remark in 1914 or ’15 by Professor R. S. Crane, then of Northwestern University, where I was an undergraduate. ‘That book will make you think,’ said he, pointing to *The Masters of Modern French Criticism* … With almost religious enthusiasm I read and reread all of Babbitt’s three books then in existence (original in English).” Written nearly two decades later, Mei’s reminiscence still captures a genuine sense of excitement and conviction. The three books were: *Literature and the American College: Essays in Defense of the Humanities* (1908), *The New Laokoon* (1910), and *The Masters of Modern French Criticism* (1912). But to fully appreciate the effect that Babbitt’s works had on Mei, we must try to understand what elements of those texts spoke to him so strongly that he would later describe himself as reading them with “almost religious enthusiasm.”

III. Humanism: a Sketch

Under the leadership of Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, Stuart Sherman, and Norman Foerster, American Humanism as “an intellectual conservatism” first emerged in the early twentieth century but did not gain a wide audience until the late 1920s. David Hoeveler, the author of *The New Humanism*, captured the essential mood of the American Humanists in the first sentence of his book: “The New Humanism sprang from a profound disaffection with the modern age.”

Irving Babbitt believed that modern society had broken from its past: the nature of man was misunderstood, traditional standards had been lost, and modern man had lost his spiritual bearings. Depicting the contemporary age as a “modern and humanitarian era,” Babbitt vehemently criticized the prevailing ideas of the time: relativism, scientism, romantic individualism, naturalistic pragmatism, and materialism. He found the roots of these “isms” in the scientific and sentimental humanitarianism of Europe.

According to Babbitt, human society develops in successive eras of expansion and concentration. During times of expansion, such as the early Renaissance, society often experiences excessive liberty and individualism along with a loss of discipline and traditional standards. During eras of concentration, such as the later Renaissance, society’s focus shifts to greater discipline and selective humanism. Although eras of both expansion and concentration aim at “forming the complete man,” each emphasizes different “virtues.” Babbitt identified the Romantic Movement as the second great era of expansion of individualism in modern times and believed that it continued to influence the current age.

The intellectual trend that Babbitt blamed for the chaos of modernity had, according to Babbitt, its roots in the scientific naturalism and pragmatism represented by Francis Bacon. Babbitt accused Bacon of neglecting human law in his pursuit of natural law and the expansion of scientific knowledge. According to Babbitt, this bias has led to an excessive utilitarian pursuit of material comfort and a corresponding neglect of spiritual wellbeing that undermined traditional standards by favoring science and utilitarian applications of both the scientific method

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90 Hoeveler, 3.
91 Ibid.
93 Hoeveler, 3, 25.
94 Babbitt, *Literature*, 78.
95 Ibid., 80.
and the technologies that arise from scientific research. Babbitt also criticized the very notion of scientific progress on the grounds that embracing the idea of progress shifts modern man’s focus from the past and present to the future. As a result, modern society has begun to identify the Golden Age with the future rather than the past.

Babbitt also found fault with the Romantic Movement that he identifies as beginning with Rousseau. Babbitt criticized Rousseau for fostering a cult of individualism and emotional abandon. For Babbitt, Rousseau’s notions of individual uniqueness and diversity undermine established common standards, and Rousseau’s idea of liberty encourages excessive temperamental expansion that abrogates all social restraints and leads to a confusion of traditional values. Babbitt was even more pointedly critical of Rousseau’s argument that men are born naturally good and that the world’s ills are caused by society and its institutions. In Babbitt’s view, both Bacon and Rousseau, the two major “prophets of the modern spirit,” were guilty of sabotaging traditional discipline.

Babbitt defines the humanitarian as “a person who has sympathy for mankind in the lump, faith in its future progress, and desire to serve the great cause of this progress.” The key trait of the humanitarian is his or her affinity for the breadth of knowledge and universal sympathy. Such humanitarians embrace the idea of progress, the innate goodness of man, and human perfectibility. In Babbitt’s view, humanitarians are problematic because they “always concerned themselves with things, not the spirit, with others, not the self.” Convinced that human beings tend to go to extremes, Babbitt saw the danger of humanitarianism residing in its excessive expansiveness, which opened the door for imperialism, Communism, cosmopolitanism, and scientism. Babbitt argued that universal altruistic sympathy and fraternity risked the danger of man becoming self-assertive while denying the power of his self-interest and his egoism. While Babbitt criticized naturalism for its negative consequences, he did not reject it outright: “In general the humanist will not repudiate either sentimental or scientific naturalism; for this would be to attempt an impossible reaction. His aim is not to deny his age, but to complete it.”

Babbitt advocated Humanism as the prescription for healing the ills of his time, drawing a clear distinction between the humanist and the humanitarian. He defines the humanist as a person who is “interested in perfecting of the individual rather than in schemes for the elevation of mankind as a whole; and although he allows largely for sympathy, he insists that it be disciplined and tempered by judgment.” In Babbitt’s formulation, the humanist seeks the cure from within rather than from external forces, and that the sympathy of the humanist is restrained by discipline and selectivity. In other words, the humanist seeks a balance “between an extreme of sympathy and an extreme of discipline and selection.” Babbitt also makes a finer distinction between humanitarian and humanists by pointing out that Humanitarianism is

96 Ibid., 72.
97 Hou, 29.
98 Babbitt, Literature, 91.
99 Ibid., 74.
100 Hou, 30.
101 Ibid.
102 Babbitt, Literature, 259.
103 Ibid., 82.
characterized by democratic inclusiveness while Humanism leans toward the aristocratic, its tenets applying “not to men in general but only to a select few.”

Distinguishing himself from Rousseau, Babbitt argued for the duality of human nature. In Babbitt’s view, the self consists of a lower self and a higher self. While the lower self tends to seek gratification of unending desires and impulses, the higher self is in the constant combat with the lower self, striving to contain it through self-restraint. In his scheme of expansion versus concentration, Babbitt saw the lower self as expansive and the higher self as concentrating.

Babbitt believed that man has the will power to act upon himself in order to control his lower nature and thereby able to cultivate such humanistic virtues as proportion, balance, and decorum. At its core, Babbitt’s Humanism is a dualistic view of human nature (higher and lower selves) in which the chief virtue is achieving harmony between extremes, finding balance and moderation, and extolling the law of measure or “nothing too much.” In short, Humanism aims at restraining the tendency toward excess.

To strengthen his argument, Babbitt sought to broaden the foundations of Humanism. He found affinities between Buddhist tradition and later Confucian tradition and western traditions: “those of Aristotle and Christ, corresponding … to those of Confucius and Buddha in the Far East.” In his late career, Babbitt referred to ancient Greece and Confucian China as “the two most notable manifestations of the humanistic spirit that the world has seen.” Linking the philosophies of Confucius and the ancient Greeks illustrates the high regard in which he held Confucianism, an appreciation that was rare among his contemporaries.

In conclusion, Babbitt’s Humanism was a campaign against the romantic excesses of the modern age. He sought to “complete” modern society “by reasserting the values they found in classical antiquity, especially discipline in place of self-indulgence, moderation in place of ‘romantic’ excess, continuity in place of mindless change, and spirituality in place of materialism and naturalism.” While Babbitt’s prescription was designed for American society, Mei Guangdi would adapt it for a Chinese society that he and his fellow reformers believed desperately needed healing.

IV. Mei Guangdi and Humanism: Intimacy and Inspiration

The historian Philip Huang, commenting on the development of Liang Qichao’s thinking, wrote: “Liang’s thinking is indicative of how Chinese and Western ideas interacted in modern China.” The same could be said of Mei’s intellectual transformation. Mei once complained: “I find it not worthwhile to read the history of philosophy written by westerners because they do not contain the thoughts of Confucius; and even if they do, it is superficial.” In his first three books, Babbitt “had not yet said anything about [Confucius and the early Taoists] in print

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104 Ibid., 74.
105 Hou, 249.
106 Irving Babbitt, “Humanistic Education in China and the West,” Chinese Students’ Monthly 17, no. 2 (December 1921), 86.
109 Philip Huang, 9.
110 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 123.
Even though Babbitt was clearly targeting an American audience, Mei read these works with religious zeal. I will argue that Mei embraced American Humanism so ardently because he brought to the encounter a predisposition to embrace the very values that Babbitt championed, a predisposition based on his earlier Chinese classical training. I will also argue that much of the Humanism’s appeal for Mei derived from Mei’s active search for an outside authority to buttress his own views on Confucianism in service of a more encompassing Chinese cultural reformation.

A. Intellectual Parallels

Mei and Babbitt were, in many ways, kindred spirits. Both felt alienated by their contemporary age and hoped to reform and reshape their societies. Babbitt believed that modern man had confused material comfort with civilization. In his view, the contemporary age could not be called a civilization since it has lost its spiritual bearings and degenerated into “a complex of material discoveries.” Babbitt’s answer to the modern challenge was to fight against the tide, challenging the fundamental assumptions of the dominant trends of his age.

Similarly, Mei used his studies in America to find the secret of western success so that he could contribute to the reconstruction of the newly established Chinese Republic. Although Mei took pride in the perceived moral superiority of China, he was keenly aware that China was materially backward; the mere fact that he had to come to the U.S. to study illustrates that backwardness. Although he lived in the U.S., he continued to pay close attention to political developments in the new Republic. He detested the policies of Yuan Shikai and supported the National Party. At the same time, Mei harbored deep disaffection with American society. He witnessed the suffering of his country as the result of both western and Japanese imperialism, the racism in America, and what he perceived as the moral degradation of American society.

Babbitt’s and Mei’s criticism of the moral debauchery of society illustrates their central concern for morality. In *Literature and American College*, after enumerating the glorious achievements of the modern world, Babbitt asked: “Why be disquieted by the increase in murders, in suicides, in insanity, in divorce…?” Independently, Mei had previously expressed these sentiments in a letter to Hu Shi in 1912 in which he listed the darker aspects of U.S. society: the rampant corruption and bribery in party politics, the high rate of homelessness, burglary, murder, prostitution, and divorce.

In addition to their shared discontent with contemporary society, Mei and Babbitt also shared a core idea: that the historical trajectory of civilization had gone awry. Babbitt traced the drift of contemporary society back to the intellectual history of seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, the era that gave rise to humanitarianism. He found Bacon especially guilty of striving to expand men’s knowledge and man’s control of nature in the pursuit of utility and comfort. But Rousseau remained his chief target, insofar as Babbitt blamed him for the emotional expansion that stressed fraternity and encouraged unrestrained self-expression. Similarly, in the China of Mei’s youth, the old societal establishments were being gradually

111 Mei, “Chapter XV,” 112.
112 Babbitt, “Humanistic Education in China,” 88.
113 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 163.
114 Babbitt, Literature, 105.
115 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 124.
overthrown and intellectuals were questioning the validity of past practices. Mei himself rejected the validity of two thousand years of Confucian practice in such a thorough manner that in his view, he considered only a few scholars, such as Zeng Guofan (1811-1812), to be genuine practitioners of the original Confucianism.

In seeking ways to solve the pressing problems of their societies and reform them, Mei and Babbitt both defended a specific version of tradition, defined as humanist. Babbitt’s humanist world is guided by Aristotle, Jesus, Buddha, and Confucius. Similarly, Mei sought to defend original Confucianism rather than the Confucianism developed by the later scholars such as Zhu Xi. They also shared a view of China. While Babbitt saw the problem with the Confucian orthodoxy, believing that China should lift itself out of “the rut of pseudo-classic formalism… as the result of a too inert traditionalism,” he also saw the necessity of its preservation. In 1922, Babbitt lectured to the Chinese students: “China should not in its eagerness to become progressive imitate the Occident and pour out the baby with the bath water.” Thus, Babbitt and Mei shared a hope for a revival of Confucianism. For Mei, Babbitt’s broader cross-cultural vision offered a better platform for reviving Confucianism than the more isolated and thus parochial Chinese critiques of Chinese culture.

Both Babbitt and Mei saw cultural syncretism as the best way to correct and improve their respective societies. Babbitt enlisted Confucianism and Buddhism in an effort to make Humanism more universal. When Harry Levin was appointed as the Irving Babbitt Professor at Harvard in 1960, Levin pointed out that “one of Babbitt’s most far-sighted contributions was his insistence that an enlightened world-view must come to terms with Asiatic thought.” While Babbitt’s interest in Buddhism and Confucianism was rare among his contemporaries, Mei’s advocacy of cultural syncretism of Chinese and western civilization was not all that unusual among Mei’s contemporary Chinese intellectuals.

Although both Mei and Babbitt advocated cultural syncretism, their motivations differed. While Babbitt enlisted Confucian and Buddhist traditions to buttress his theory of Humanism, Mei used the syncretism built into Humanism to address what he saw as China’s inability to revitalize its core cultural heritage, i.e., Confucianism, without employing the alternate perspectives offered by western thoughts.

Although Mei’s appreciation of Babbitt was logically founded on their essential agreement on the value of the Chinese Confucian tradition, Mei’s reliance on western sages “betray a lack confidence that traditional Chinese thought could stand on its own merits.” Mei concluded an article that introduced Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) to Chinese readers with: “From the publication of David Wilson’s book on Carlyle, I discovered another western friend who appreciates the Chinese culture. My admiration towards Carlyle was deepened and my faith towards Chinese culture became more unshakable.” In comments such as this, in which Mei

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116 Babbitt, “Humanistic Education in China,” 86.
117 Ibid.
118 Hou, 249.
119 Wang, 264.
120 Ibid.
122 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 75.
reveals the positive effect that a prestigious western scholar’s appreciation of Chinese culture could have on him, we once more get a whiff of Mei’s underlying cultural insecurity.

Finally, Babbitt and Mei shared an abiding affection for literature. Hoeveler points out that “the Humanists found their identity as lovers of literature and moral critics of life… [I]n a certain sense, literature was their real world. They looked to books to find what life did not give, and in books they sought the realization of their highest aspirations for man… Literature was always the sounding board for the Humanists’ judgment of life.”123 By Hoeveler’s formulation, Mei was a typical Humanist, preferring to be a man of literature rather than a philosopher. Mei remarked that the essential role of the literary man is to study life and teach others how to become more perfect men. According to Mei, the literary man differs from the philosopher in that the literary man’s philosophy of life is grounded on a relationship with the real lives of real people rather than in the more abstract axioms and principles of pure philosophy, and it is this grounding in real life that allows the literary man to practice the moral lessons found in the great works of literature.124

In their choice of literature, Babbitt and Mei both embraced the classics. Babbitt did, after all, graduate with honors from the Classics Department at Harvard in 1889.125 In Literature and the American College: Essays in Defense of the Humanities, Babbitt lamented that the contemporary educational system was drifting away from the study of classics. He pointed out that the chief benefit of classical study was “leaving no chasm between ancient and modern life” and “the emancipation from this servitude to the present.”126 He was convinced that by relating the classics “more largely to the needs and aspirations of modern life,” the study of classics could become “one of the best preparations for practical life.”127

Mei followed Babbitt’s view that classical literature contributes to the continuity of tradition; and, for Mei, Chinese classicism “takes as its philosophical and literary models the Confucian classics (original in English).”128 Mei especially valued the way that Chinese classicism built on the achievements and standards of the ancients in order to guide people to reach their full capacity as humans.129 Mei also favored classicism because of its emphasis on imitation, standards, and relative lack of belief in “original genius (original in English).”130 He was convinced that these qualities stood in opposition to those of the romantic school,131 a keen point of contention with Hu Shi’s approach to literary revolution.

Given their exaltation of classical literature, it is not surprising that both Babbitt and Mei also shared a deep affection for ancient languages. Babbitt learned Sanskrit and Pali, eventually translating the Dhammapada. Although he ended up being a professor of French rather than the Classics as he desired,132 Babbitt fought all claims that learning modern languages could

123 Hoeveler, 25.
124 Guangdi Mei, Mei Guangdi wen, 71.
125 Wang, 261.
126 Babbitt, Literature, 160.
127 Ibid., 178.
128 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 371.
129 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 175.
130 Ibid., 176.
131 Ibid., 176.
132 Wang, 261.
substitute for the study of the classical languages.\textsuperscript{133} He cautioned that “the present preponderance of modern languages over Greek and Latin is due to their utilitarian and sentimental appeal rather than their cultural superiority.”\textsuperscript{134}

The four proposals for a literary revolution that Mei made to Hu Shi serve as a good example of Mei’s strong attachment to ancient Chinese. The four proposals were: (1) Elimination of Literary Conventions (2) Re-employment of ancient words to enhance vocabulary (3) Addition of new words that the old literature does not contain, such as the vocabulary of science, law, and politics. (4) The prudent addition of meaningful vernacular Chinese terms that have their origins in and have aesthetic value to literature. In evaluating his own proposals, Mei wrote: “Number two, three, and four are constructive, of which the second is the most important and effective and the fourth is the least important and effective.”\textsuperscript{135} Mei also pointed out that the key to achieving literary revolution was to master the Chinese language by reading ancient books and the literature that had been neglected by the orthodox. Mei’s strong emphasis on the language of ancient times, orthodox or not, further underscores his deep attachment to the ancient Chinese language. In fact, Mei continued writing classical Chinese even in the 1940s when he was serving as a member of the National Congress, two decades after vernacular textbooks had been instituted in Chinese schools.

B. Inspiration: a World Humanist Mission

If Babbitt had only confirmed Mei’s preexisting views, Mei would have found in Babbitt, at most, a kindred spirit not a powerful mentor. Babbitt’s books gave Mei the tools to interpret Confucianism in humanistic terms and also use American Humanism to defend Confucianism. Most of the Chinese who knew or read Babbitt recognized that Humanism as defined by Babbitt had many parallels in traditional Chinese thought.\textsuperscript{136} It is therefore not surprising that Mei so readily described Confucianism in Humanist terms: “The culture of our country is humanistic. It emphasizes moral cultivation in individuals. The goal of our culture is to nurture junzi, the gentlemen-scholar or humanist in Western culture. The way to nurture junzi is to overcome the individual desires inherent in education…”\textsuperscript{137} Mei shared with Babbitt this fundamental emphasis on morality. Babbitt, in turn, praised China because it “has perhaps more than any other country planted itself on moral ideas.”\textsuperscript{138}

The Taiwanese scholar Shen Songqiao identifies an equivalence between the Humanist principle of self-restraint and the Confucian concept of ke ji, and a correspondence between the Humanist tendency to defend tradition and the Chinese concept of fu li.\textsuperscript{139} Zhu Shoutong believes that the correspondence between the Confucian concept of ke ji fu li and the “Babbittian” concept of self-restraint or “inner check” marks the greatest overlap between New

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{133} Babbitt, \textit{Literature}, 165.
\bibitem{134} Hou, 51.
\bibitem{135} Mei, \textit{Mei Guangdi}, 171.
\bibitem{136} Hou, 68.
\bibitem{137} Wang, 257.
\bibitem{138} Babbitt, “Humanistic Education in China,” 87.
\bibitem{139} Songqiao Shen, \textit{Xuehengpai yu wusi shiqi de fan xinwenhua yundong} (Taipei: Guoli Taiwan daxue chuban weiyuanhui, 1984), 128-131.
\end{thebibliography}
Humanism and Confucianism.\textsuperscript{140} Mei seems to have identified Babbitt’s concept of “inner check,” the opposite of “outward expansion,”\textsuperscript{141} as the Confucian concept of “neixiu.”\textsuperscript{142}

Identifying Babbitt’s concept of “the gentlemen scholar (honnête homme)”\textsuperscript{143} and “inner check”\textsuperscript{144} with the Chinese concepts of “junzi” and “neixiu,” Mei effectively incorporated the concepts of Humanism into a Chinese context. Drawing on another western concept, Mei wrote: “Just as the golden rule of ‘nothing too much’ was never fulfilled by the ancient Greeks, so has the Confucian doctrine of the mean remained with us merely as an ideal (original in English).”\textsuperscript{145} Babbitt himself identified the Greek concept of “nothing too much” as “the law of measure.”\textsuperscript{146}

Thus, Mei identified the key concepts of Humanism, “the law of measure,” as the Chinese concept of “Zhongyong.”

By interpreting Confucianism as humanistic, Mei discovered a historical affinity between western and Chinese civilizations. The common denominator was their humanistic tradition and the role of sages in shaping that tradition. Mei proclaimed: “All humanity is essentially alike in all places and all ages (original in English)”\textsuperscript{147} and “the seemingly divergent cultures of the East and the West [are] essentially a unity (original in English).”\textsuperscript{148} Mei also found commonalities in the classical literature of both civilizations in that they shared the principles of “imitation, restraint, and above all the doctrine that [the purpose of] literature is to convey truths (original in English).”\textsuperscript{149} The universalism of Humanism and its assertion of the common “religion of great men (original in English),”\textsuperscript{150} allowed Mei to continue to celebrate the uniqueness of Chinese Confucianism and find it every bit the equal of western culture. Adopting and applying the precepts and perspectives of Humanism further enabled Mei to alleviate his cultural insecurities by elevating Chinese culture, commonly perceived as backward, to “world status.”\textsuperscript{151} Even as Mei was reinterpreting Confucianism in humanist terms, he was also discovering a world of humanism within western tradition. If Babbitt broke the dominant western ethnocentrism by finding support for his theories in the Orient, the commonalities shared by Chinese and western civilizations enabled Mei to depart from his earlier sinocentric views. That is to say, instead of asserting the superiority of Chinese “moral civilization” and Chinese pre-Qing scholarship, Mei came to realize that Confucianism was only one branch in the world of humanism. This insight gave him a way of better appreciating the western humanistic tradition.

Mei used Humanism to break the monolithic image of “the west” into two parts -- “the old” and “the new” — giving priority to the old. Discovering the value of the ancient West freed Mei from “the shackles of a narrow contemporaneity (original in English).” As part of this new

\textsuperscript{140} Shoutong Zhu, Xinrenwen zhuyi de Zhongguo yingji (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2009), 500.
\textsuperscript{142} Mei, Mei Guangdi, 176.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{144} Mei, Letters, 192.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 192.
\textsuperscript{146} Babbitt, Literature, 83.
\textsuperscript{147} Mei, Letters, 193.
\textsuperscript{148} Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 367.
\textsuperscript{149} Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 371-372.
\textsuperscript{150} Mei, “Chapter XV,” 120.
\textsuperscript{151} Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 368.
perspective, Mei would no longer divide “Western Cultural history into periods, with all the honors to the latest (original in English).” Mei’s changing attitude towards Tolstoy illustrates his transformation. In 1911, he was still praising Hu Shi as the Tolstoy of the Orient. As Mei later recalled, “I was then, perhaps like many others of my age, reposing in the lap of Tolstoyan humanitarianism… (original in English).” By 1917, Mei had clearly outgrown his faith in modern thinking that Babbitt labeled “humanitarian.” Mei now openly criticized the “Tolstoyan worship of the untutored peasant (original in English)” as a perverse consequence of extreme naturalism.

By emphasizing the similarities between East and West, the rationale of humanism erased many of the apparent differences between the modern west and backward China. Mei saw the gap between China and the west as much smaller than the gap between the ancient and modern civilizations. Mei wrote: “The prevailing allegation of the backwardness of Chinese civilization, as contrasted with modern Western civilization … is now seen to be pointless and irrelevant. The contrast is undeniable, but the points of similarity are more undeniable especially if the two civilizations are adjudged historically and with reference to the great spiritual leaders that both have produced through the ages (original in English).” In Mei’s holistic historical view, the similarity of ancient China and the ancient west transcends the differences between the modern west and China. The apparent cultural divergence between contemporary China and the west becomes insignificant. Rosen explained Mei’s rationale:

A Western education under Irving Babbitt’s tutelage nourished their Confucian traditionalism by providing a rationale. If Confucian China was really eternal China, as the pre-Renaissance West had been the eternal West, there existed no need to find a scientific or political equivalence with the west. True, traditional China lacked scientific expertise and mass democracy, but this was historically unimportant, for these were of small consequence in the continuance of a civilization.

Clearly, part of Mei’s attraction to Humanism was that it “transcend[ed] the boundaries of the east and west and contains the universal and everlasting qualities (original in English).” This universalist impulse in Humanism inspired Mei to propose a possible “humanist international.” In 1922, Babbitt called upon Chinese students: “Why not work for a humanistic international? An international, one may say, of gentlemen who… feel that they can at least unite on a platform of moderation and common Sense and common decency. My hope is that, if such a humanistic movement gets started in the West, it will have a response in a Neo-Confucian movement in China…” Mei Guangdi responded enthusiastically to his master’s call, quoting Babbitt in his reflections on the Xueheng project entitled “Humanism and Modern China.” Through the humanist international Mei found that the ideas of Babbitt “offered a possibility of

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152 Ibid., 367.
153 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 111.
154 Mei, “Chapter XV,” 112.
155 Mei, Letters, 191.
156 Rosen, 19, 20.
157 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 368-369.
158 Rosen, 19, 20.
159 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 370.
reaffirming China’s own legacies and thereby achieving not simply physical survival but also the survival of her spiritual values as well.”160 In short, Mei took Babbitt’s advice to heart, seeking a solution to China’s ills by advocating a Neo-Confucian movement.

In introducing Irving Babbitt and Paul More to Chinese audiences, Mei pointed out that “they both absorb the cultural essence of the nations in the world and are not limited to one period or one place. They view the modern cultural problem as a world problem. Therefore, their broad and deep learning cannot be matched by those who are only limited to Confucius.”161 Even as Mei sought to establish the authority of Babbitt and More, he emphasized the grander and more far-reaching cause of Humanism by distinguishing between humanists and traditional Confucians, acknowledging that those Confucians who did not have a humanist’s cosmopolitan views were necessarily limited. Thus Mei was defending Confucianism while promoting Humanism in China. It is not surprising, then, that one decade after the Xueheng endeavor, Mei could characterize his efforts as a “Chinese advocacy of humanism (original in English),”162 whose “position is Confucian (original in English).”163

Under the aegis of the humanist international, which, as the name implies, directed its message across national and cultural boundaries, Mei propagated the ideas of New Humanism in China while simultaneously using his Chinese perspective to promote Babbitt’s New Humanist Movement in the United States. As Mei put it: “By opposing the New Culture and May Fourth movements, the Hsueh-heng believed it was not only protecting China’s ‘national heritage’ against liberal and radical subversion but also defending the ‘true’ cultural heritage of the West.”164 While Mei realized that the success of the humanist mission in the west would greatly contribute to reformation in China, Babbitt believed that if the Chinese failed to preserve the humanist tradition, it would doom the West as well. In other words, the fate of the Chinese and the western humanist movements were interdependent.

At a time when Mei still was finding inspiration in Christianity, he wrote: “I believe that Confucianism and Christianity belong to one family. If Confucianism prospers, Christianity will prosper as well. Since both Confucianism and Christianity have shortcomings, it is necessary that each complement the other in order to achieve perfection.”165 Mei’s assessment of the mutual interdependence of Confucianism and Christianity echoes his views on the interrelations between the Chinese and the western humanist movement. “Bai Bida (白必达),”166 the Chinese name that Mei gave Irving Babbitt, suggests that Mei was hoping for the greatest possible success of both his teacher’s and his own humanist mission, a mission that took the whole world as its arena.

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160 Hou, 250.
161 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 24.
162 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 365.
164 Rosen, iv.
165 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 134.
166 Guangdi Mei, “Minquan zhuyi zhi liubi lun,” Liumei xuesheng jibao 3, no. 3 (Fall, 1916): 49.
Chapter Two: Confucian Humanism in Practice

As previously noted, Mei’s encounter with Irving Babbitt’s American Humanism in 1914/1915 marked the second stage in Mei’s intellectual development. Mei’s memoir testifies to his transformation after reading Babbitt’s works:

They were a new world to me, or rather an old world reoriented in new terms with new significance. For the first time, I became aware that something might be done in China in a similar spirit to bridge the gap that a ruthless and indiscriminate undermining of her cultural foundations over the past two decades had widened between the old and the new, to restore in the Chinese mind a sense of historical continuity, and to reinforce it, in a period of unprecedented emergency, with its wealth of accumulated resources (original in English).  

American Humanism enabled Mei to both reconfirm his faith in China’s cultural legacy and also free himself from his Sino-centric views. Mei pointed out that

The critical estimation of Confucian humanism by Babbitt has in a sense shown his Chinese pupils what the world status of Chinese culture is… Partly as a result of [Babbitt’s] influence, his pupils have a new approach to their native cultural background—an approach based on a more critical attitude and technique than before. But the upshot of this critical approach is not, as with so many young Chinese intellectuals, a strengthening of their apostasy, but a reaffirmation of their faith (original in English).

Taking Mei at his word, his reaffirmation and defense of Confucian tradition was consciously decided and not, as historian Joseph Levenson argued merely an exile’s psychological attachment to “history” and lacking in critical reflection.

The arrival of the New Culture Movement soon provided Mei with an opportunity to apply his faith in Confucian Humanism to practice. While Mei’s essential reinterpretation of Confucianism remained unchanged, he shifted the focus of his interest in literary reform to defending Confucian tradition through cultural syncretism and fighting what he saw as the anti-humanism of the New Culture Movement. Refusing neither to be an iconoclastic radical nor to be a hidebound conservative, Mei sought for a middle way to construct China’s “new culture.”

I. “Harvest[ing] the best fruits of both the old and the new”  

Mei’s faith in American Humanism with its belief in “the essential unity of Eastern and Western cultures in their totality (original in English)” served as the foundation of his vision

167 Mei, “Chapter XV,” 112.
168 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 368.
170 Mei, Letters, 192.
171 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 370.
for China’s future and his conviction that Confucianism remained relevant to modern China. The perspectives of American Humanism enabled Mei to find cultural correspondences in the humanist traditions of both China and the West, and to apply cultural syncretism to the reformation of modern China. Mei believed that Confucian humanism, which he saw as the essence of Chinese identity, would prevent such potential excesses of the modern spirit as scientism and individualism. In short, Mei envisioned a modern China with Confucianism preserved; a vision of modernity without rupture from its past.

Meanwhile, Mei’s disaffection with the Euro-American version of modern society enabled him to see that what the West had achieved was not fully desirable and that a better version of modern society was possible. He wrote to Hu Shi: “we should never be satisfied with the so-called ‘modernization civilization,’ and must seek a much better one…”172 For Mei, Chinese modernization did not equal westernization. If the western model was detrimental to western civilization, why should China follow the wrong path of the west? Mei asserted China’s right to pursue its own version of modernization, free from the grip of western modernity.

Mei saw cultural syncretism as an alternative to wholesale westernization in China’s cultural reconstruction. In “The Task of Our Generation,” an article written in 1917, Mei declared that “the supreme task we are called to perform in this generation is… to find a way out of this unprecedented national crisis; that is, to readjust the existing and rising conditions in such a manner as to harvest the best fruits of both the old and the new through a process of harmonization (original in English).”173 For him, “the old” referred to the humanist traditions in China and the west; “the new” referred to the American Humanism in the modern west. Emphasizing cosmopolitan spirit, Mei pointed out the necessity for Chinese to identify “not only with the spirit of any one age, but with the spirit of all ages.”174

Mei’s priority was to find constant values that transcend individual times in order to “arrive at some definite standard whereby to weigh human values to judge between the true and the false, and to discriminate between the essentials and the contingencies (original in English).”175 Mei was convinced that there had to be elements of the Chinese tradition that deserved preservation and amplification. Ultimately, Mei hoped that the Confucian tradition would manage to “resist the onslaught of revolutionary missiles and emerge with resurgent strength and magnified splendor, as a result of the infusion of fresh energy and blood from Western culture (original in English).”176

Ida Lee Mei, Mei Guangdi’s wife, confirmed that cultural syncretism was Mei’s chosen approach to Chinese cultural reconstruction. She subtitled Letters of K. T. Mei, published in 1980, “Whose Life-goal was Harmony of the Best in the East and the West,” a subtitle that captured what she believed was her husband’s vision for China’s future. She identified Mei’s goal as “mutual understanding and frank interpretation of both East and West,” striving for “a combination of the best, the essence of the spirit and ideal of China and the West.”177 She also

172 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 146.
173 Mei, Letters, 192.
174 Ibid.
175 Ibid.
176 Ibid., 194.
177 Ida lee Mei, 97.
states that Mei “saw a harmony in the best of the East and West, and saw in the combination an elevation for mankind.”

Mei’s vision seems to defy Levenson’s assessment of the Chinese cultural synthesizers “selecting the best in East and West”. Levenson asserts that: “the only motive which a Chinese could have in celebrating the beauty of blended values would be a desire—entirely foreign to the world of value—to see China and the West as equal partners. The supposed commitment to value alone, to the generally acceptable, masks a concern with its special, historical origins.” The underlying assumption of Levenson’s conclusion is that the Chinese blindly accepted western superiority and pushed for equivalence with the West by forcing self-elevation. From Mei’s writing, however, we see that, Mei not only considered Chinese civilization fundamentally equivalent to western civilization, but also intended to go beyond the limitations of the west and aimed a better version of culture, an approach differing from Levenson’s formulation.

Mei took a gradualist approach to constructing a new culture for China:

Revising our traditional culture and absorbing other people’s culture first requires thorough study. This should involve the exercise of clear and correct judgment, the support of the most appropriate methodologies, and the collective efforts of hundreds of erudite scholars who are capable of synthesizing Eastern and Western learning, in order to teach and guide our fellow countrymen on this course of reform and develop it into a significant trend. Then after forty or fifty years results will be quite noticeable.

Although the essential characteristic of his cultural syncretism is “universal-mindedness,” Mei’s cosmopolitanism was limited. He opened the door for American Humanism while closing it to others. Mei proposed two principles of cultural importation. First, what was to be introduced needed to have intrinsic value. The criteria by which this value should be determined should be based on the judgment of the sages rather than on the preferences of the people. Second, these values should be compatible with the Chinese condition. In other words, they should not be “too alien to the best traditions that, through the test of time, have come to compose the very marrow of the Chinese national ethos (original in English).” Therefore, only those foreign values that did not contradict preexisting Chinese cultural values could be imported to either strengthen or enrich the Chinese cultural tradition. Based on these two principles, Mei was convinced that Babbitt’s humanism, which affirmed the value of Chinese civilization while simultaneously stressing internationalism and a cultural syncretism that transcended the division of East and West, qualified for importation. Mei’s strict principles further confirm his distrust of the Chinese public and his belief that it was the responsibility of intellectuals to make judgments on cultural imports.

It is not surprising that Mei wanted to entrust the task of modernizing China to Confucian gentlemen scholars. He believed that they not only belonged to the new intellectual class but that

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178 Ibid, 153.
181 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 370.
182 Ibid.
they also best represented the Chinese national ethos. Mei believed that Confucian scholars “would not make themselves denationalized hybrids, or at best, second-rate Europeans and Americans, but remain essentially Chinese… (original in English).”\(^{183}\) Meǐ’s need to assert the “Chineseness” of Confucian scholars once again reflects his underlying anxiety over the national identity of the Chinese. By entrusting the task to the Confucians, Meǐ was trying to take leadership away from both “the standpatter” and “the Jacobin.”\(^{184}\) He saw both as problematic because “they both fail to see life as a whole; the one is drunk with his Utopias of the future, while the other is asleep amidst his Arcadian dreams of the past (original in English).”\(^{185}\) Meǐ’s suspicion of both extremes is a clear expression of his adherence to Zhongyong or the law of the measure.

Meǐ also did not see Marxism as a solution for China ills and found little to trust in the power of the proletariat. The remedy for the domination of mercantilism, he believed, did not lie “in a revolt of the proletariat (for the proletariat, one can easily surmise, would do exactly the same things if they were in the place of the present-day millionaires… (original in English).”\(^{186}\) Meǐ’s attitude comports well with his own status as a member of the former ruling intellectual class and as an heir of the Confucian tradition. Having ultimate faith in Confucians, Meǐ called on his countrymen “to prove to both China and the West what the real genius of Chinese culture can do in the way of modernizing their country (original in English).”\(^{187}\)

While believing that China should learn from the West, Meǐ was equally convinced that Chinese culture would benefit the modern west as well. For instance, he was convinced that the West was suffering from “the evils of the present mercantile domination (original in English).”\(^{188}\) He lamented the fact that this Western illness was spreading in China, giving rise to a proletariat and the ascendance of a moneyed class. In order to preserve both Chinese and the Western civilizations from the onslaught of the mercantilism, Meǐ somewhat unrealistically proposed reinstating a traditional Chinese political and social structure with scholars at the top and tradesman at the bottom.

Rejecting the worst of western modernity and championing a cultural syncretism of the best of both worlds allowed Meǐ to avoid the problematic “Chinese dilemma of modernity,” as identified by Guy Alitto. In his study of Liang Shuming, Alitto identified an inherent dilemma in Liang’s thinking: “China could not retain its culture because it was directly responsible for the present problem that threatened to destroy it; yet if China abandoned its culture for the West’s, then China would suffer the dehumanization and spiritual distress inherent in Western culture.”\(^{189}\) Meǐ’s gradual moderate path of taking only the best that Western civilization had to offer while rejecting the rest, thereby reforming China while preserving China’s dignity, avoids the very dilemma that Alitto identified.

\(^{183}\) Ibid, 24.
\(^{184}\) Mei, Letters, 192.
\(^{185}\) Mei, Letters, 190.
\(^{186}\) Guangdi Mei, “Is the West Awakening?” The Nation 122, no. 3172 (April 21, 1926): 448.
\(^{187}\) Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 373-374.
\(^{188}\) Mei, “Is the West awakening?” 448.
II. Theory in Action: “A Critique of the New Culturists”

A. The Confucian Sage of Harvard: a Foreign Authority in the Chinese Context

During the May Fourth era, Confucianism was so devalued that few defended it or even argued for its validity. Much of the criticism of the New Culturists proved ineffective. Lin Shu, for instance, protested the abolition of classical Chinese, but admitted, “Although I understand the principle, I cannot express in words why this is so.”\(^{190}\) New Culturists like Hu Shi easily dismissed such complaints as laughable. But both classically trained and Harvard-educated Mei Guangdi was no Lin Shu: not only had he thought critically about this very question, he had the outside authority of Irving Babbitt with which to challenge the credibility of his intellectual adversaries.\(^{191}\)

Guy Alitto alludes to the potential power of foreign authority in China at the time: “The tremendous prestige of Western Ideas in post-May Fourth China led traditionalist thinkers of all shades into some strange contortions.”\(^{192}\) Qian Mu saw the approach of the Xueheng scholars in resisting the New Culturists as unique: “Only the Xueheng school attempted to correct western thinking through western thoughts, which differs from the views of East and West of the two Liangs (Liang Qichao and Liang Shuming).”\(^{193}\) Employing a foreign intellectual school that opposed Dewey, the teacher of Hu Shi, not only made Mei stand out from the earlier defenders of tradition but also enabled Chinese audiences to become aware of the diversity of foreign scholarship. “If one Western authority could thus be enlisted to discredit another, a homogeneous view of the West no longer obtained.”\(^{194}\)

To fight the prevalent New Cultural Movement, Mei first characterized Babbitt’s mature thinking as “fan dong (反动 iconoclastic),” pointing out that he “negates most of the various fashionable radical thoughts of the moment.”\(^{195}\) Using Babbitt to bolster his readers’ faith in Confucius and to convince his Chinese audience of the merits of Humanism, Mei emphasized the “Confucian” side of Babbitt, pointing out that Babbitt admired Confucius. For Mei and many Chinese students, Babbitt’s support of Confucianism was more than psychologically comforting; in many cases it led to “a reaffirmation of their faith” in Chinese civilization.\(^{196}\) Not surprisingly, “oriental students…came to him as to a great sage.”\(^{197}\)

In part due to Mei’s efforts, Irving Babbitt was transformed from “the Warring Buddha of Harvard”\(^{198}\) into a Harvard-based Confucian sage, and from a Professor of French literature into a Confucian who deserved “membership in the most exclusive of Chinese national institutions, the Temple of Confucius (original in English).”\(^{199}\) Mei believed Babbitt was “the first Western writer to appraise the quintessential humanism of the Confucian teaching…” (original in

\(^{191}\) Hou, 136. Lydia Liu, 249.
\(^{192}\) Alitto, 96.
\(^{194}\) Lidia Liu, 249.
\(^{196}\) Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 368.
\(^{197}\) Wang, 264.
\(^{198}\) Hoeveler, 11.
\(^{199}\) Mei, “Chapter XV,” 126.
Babbitt provided intellectual heft to the future revival of Confucianism. Hou Chien seconds Mei’s estimation, pointing out that “very likely [Babbitt] had been the first to talk about Chinese Humanism…” In addition, Hou affirms that “the Chinese rendering of the term, *jen-wen chu-I* (人文主义), was definitely the work of [Babbitt’s] Chinese students.” In a letter to Hu Shi, thought to have been written on December, 28, 1916, Mei wrote: “In regard to views of life, I speak ‘Humanism;’ in terms of literature, I speak classicism.” In that letter, Mei translated Humanism as “ren xue zhu yi (人学主义).”

The Confucian sage of the Harvard did, in fact, direct his Chinese disciples’ Chinese campaign. In a letter dated September 17, 1921, Babbitt wrote to Wu Mi, who had been recruited by Mei as the chief editor of *Xueheng*, clearly stated his assessment of the Chinese situation: “My special interest, as you know, is in the great Confucian tradition and the elements of admirable humanism that it contains. This tradition needs to be revitalized and adjusted to new conditions, but anything approaching a complete break with it would in my judgment be a grave disaster for China itself and ultimately perhaps for the rest of us.”

In another letter written on July 24, 1924, Babbitt commented on Wu’s translation of M. Mercier’s French article on his thought into Chinese: “the value of this kind of translation is that it may open the way for cooperation between those who are working for a humanistic movement in China and those who are interested in starting a similar movement in the Occident...” These letters reveal that Babbitt considered rescuing China from the danger of a total break from Confucian tradition as *Xueheng*’s urgent top priority and that he identified the effort of *Xueheng* as a “humanist movement” aiming at the rejuvenation of Confucian Humanism.

After suggesting to Wu a list of potential contributors, Babbitt added, “I wish, by the way, you could publish notices of John Dewey’s last two volumes of a kind that will expose his superficiality. He has been exercising a bad influence in this country, and I suspect also in China...” Written on September 17, 1922, two months after Dewey left China, Babbitt’s clearly expected his Chinese disciples to continue his debate with Dewey.

Although Mei saw Babbitt as a great western authority he could rely on, the strength of this authority on the Chinese intellectual battle ground was questionable. On August 2, 1925, Wu Mi reported to his Professor the abysmal intellectual conditions he faced:

In China, besides Messrs K. T. May, H.H. Hu, & myself, no one will think of translating your works. No one will do it, even if they are paid. Few will even accept your ideas. Only some faithful adherents to the direct teachings of Confucius are willing to be taught and guided by you. O, my dear Master, this is a sad revelation... I have never seen any discussion of your ideas, the appearance of your name, outside of the columns of the Critical Review. No, absolutely none.

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200 Ibid., 120.
201 Hou, 72.
202 Wu, 12.
203 Ibid., 14.
204 Ibid., 13.
205 Hou, 251.
206 Wu, 24.
Wu’s account reveals that Babbitt’s authority amounted to little in the propagation of Confucian Humanism. In the prevailing tide towards anti-traditionalism of the New Culture Movement, these Chinese Humanists were indeed isolated.

B. The Logic of the Criticism

For Mei, American Humanism is more than just a foreign authority with which to battle the New Culturists. On March 17, 1945, just seven months before Mei died, he reread the biography, Irving Babbitt: Man and Teacher, and confessed to his diary that “in reminiscence of my teacher, [I] am even more convinced that Babbitt was a sage of the modern age.” Mei had no reason to include idle flattery of Babbitt in his personal diary. Such an entry demonstrates the depth and durability of Mei’s belief in Humanism. Mei’s belief in Humanism clearly went beyond his respect and affection for its chief proponent.

In 1916, Mei had heatedly debated the prospect of literary revolution with Hu Shi by private correspondence. Mei’s most public critical attacks on the New Culturists can be found in five articles that he published in the Xueheng journal in 1921 and 1922. Mei identified Hu Shi as the chief leader of the New Culturists who aimed for “a total cultural revolution (original in English)” and “an uncompromising Westernization of Chinese life and thought (original in English).” While Mei and Hu both shared the agenda of constructing a new Chinese culture, they approached the issue from different philosophical camps.

One may wonder why Mei Guangdi and Hu Shi chose the field of literature as their intellectual battleground. Chow Tse-tsung points out that “literature was the major profession of the traditional Chinese intellectuals. This fact immediately explains why the literary revolution played so significant a role in the May Fourth Movement, which was led by the intelligentsia.” Jerome B. Grieder addresses the deeper meaning of Hu Shi’s approach: “The literary revolution aimed far beyond the destruction of a literary style... Its proponents were repudiating an entire cultural and social inheritance.” Mei’s initial response to Hu’s concept of “the living words of the twentieth century” reveals that he quickly spotted the threat that Hu’s idea posed insofar as it risked cutting China’s connection with its past. Mei wrote: “Words carry ideas. The thoughts of the people of the twentieth century mostly are influenced by the people of ancient times... How can you be so lacking in historical awareness?”

Tsiang Tingfu, a New Culturist sympathizer, tried to explain why literature held such special appeal to so many traditionalists:

Literature is easily proven to be the keystone of the arch of conservatism. It is the reservoir of the words of wisdom of our ancient ages. It is not merely literature; it is philosophy in the Greek sense. It is beautiful, and embodying as it does the glories of

207 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 97.
208 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 370.
209 Chow, 269.
210 Grieder, 77.
211 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 164.
the past, it is especially appealing to those who are keenly conscious of their lack of glory in the present day….212

Mei explained the importance of literature:

As the leaders of the Chinese movement are primarily men of letters and, like the American humanists, very much concerned with the ethical basis and import of literature as an expression and a way of life, they have made themselves the upholders of the classical school of Chinese literature against the extreme views and tendencies championed by the leaders of the so-called Literary Revolution (original in English).213

For Mei, the classical literature with its emphasis on imitation and standards is not only the carrier of Confucian moral teachings, but also an instrument to curb the extreme tendencies that he saw in Hu’s literary revolution.

To solve Chinese problems, Mei believed that it was necessary to consult western history. For example, with regards to the revolution in Chinese poetry, he suggested to Hu Shi that he should study the poems of Wordsworth or Hugo and compare them with the poetry of the eighteenth century to see how the literary men of the West had conducted their revolution.214 To challenge Hu’s notions of literary evolution, Mei, once again assuming that Chinese and Western history were comparable, pointed out that, in western literature, many literary schools coexisted.215

For Mei, to learn from the western experience implied that China could and should avoid committing the West’s mistakes. One message of Babbitt’s criticism of scientific naturalism and sentimental naturalism was that their excessive emphasis on progress, science, individualism, and fraternity had contributed to the negative developments of materialism, scientism, imperialism, and spiritual decline. From Mei’s perspective, these undesirable outcomes were precisely the things that a modernizing China should avoid. Addressing the task of “literary revolution,” Mei obviously was concerned with the potential negative consequence of such reforms. Drawing an analogy between Chinese literary reform and the romantic movement, he warned Hu Shi that “the literary revolution of our country is an extremely difficult problem. If carried out casually, it undoubtedly will follow the [pattern of] European literary revolutions and make posterity suffer.”216 Mei wanted China to construct a new culture without repeating the same mistakes as the West.

Mei’s letter to Hu Shi on March 19, 1916 revealed that they shared a similar vision of reform in their initial phase of discussion on “literary revolution.” Mei wrote: “it goes without saying that the literary revolution ought to begin with ‘people’s literature’ (such as folklore, popular poetry, spoken language, etc). However, this revolution must endure powerful attacks; initial calls for vernacular literature will inevitably be ridiculed and attacked by conservative men of letters. But on our part we rather welcome their scornful attacks.”217 Mei’s willingness to

212 Rosen, 36.
213 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China”, 371.
214 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 160.
216 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 176.
217 Ibid., 162. Yu, 315.
incorporate “folklore, popular poetry, and spoken language (original in English)” into literature follows the similar trends of other late nineteenth century literary reforms. The dominant nineteenth century Chinese literary schools deemed only poetry and nonfiction prose as serious literature and regarded fiction and drama with relative contempt. Mei’s willingness to change literary conventions further highlights his self-identified reformist spirit of “doing away with old habits and values (pohuai).” Yet, Mei’s call for change may not have been as sweeping as he imagined it to be, even though he claimed that his reformist zeal was “no less than that of Hu Shi.”

As Mei discovered more and more elements in Hu’s New Culture advocacy that violated his Humanist principles, Mei’s attacks on Hu Shi grew more intense. Concerning Hu’s controversial promotion of vernacular poetry, Mei drew an analogy between Hu Shi’s approach and that of the contemporary American literary schools of “Futurism, Imagism, Free Verse and various Decadent movements in literature and in arts.” What Hu and his American counterparts had in common was their obsession with newness rather than truthfulness. Mei then traced the roots of these American schools back to Rousseau and the Romantic Movement, which Mei, like Babbitt, blamed for an excessive emphasis on freedom, creativity, and the confusion of standards in the contemporary society. Following Babbitt’s animosity to Rousseau and Rousseau’s profoundly negative influence on the modern world, Mei identified Hu Shi as a Chinese representative of the modern spirit of Bacon and Rousseau. For Mei, Hu’s intention to break with the Chinese past resembled the naturalists’ break with the classical past. In addition, Hu represented all of the unfavorable modern humanitarian impulses that all humanists so abhorred. In Mei’s eyes, Hu was wrong not only in his rejection of tradition, but also because of his relativism, populism, radicalism, and pragmatism. Mei’s humanist logic significantly contributed to his defense of “history” and his arguments with the new intellectuals.

While his teacher was attacking Rousseau and Bacon and their modern representatives, Mei was attacking the New Culturists, with his former close friend Hu Shi as his primary target. Reminiscing a decade after the Xueheng movement, Mei clearly acknowledged the affinity between that movement and American Humanism: “With respect to many fundamental ideas and doctrines, the humanist movement in America is a very important source of reference and inspiration for a similar movement in China.” As a convert to this new

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218 Chow listed the ideas of literary reform at the turn of the nineteenth century: “(1) A new poetry was advocated after 1895 by a few young poets and political reformers of the Hundred Days’ Reform. They tried to bring into poetic writing some prose diction, new or Western terms, and common words found in folksongs. (2) the style of Chinese prose was in some instance adjusted to utilitarian purpose. Examples were the translations of Yen Fu and Lin Shu, the popular essays of Liang Ch’i-ch’ao, and the political essays of Chang Shih’chao.... (3) the spoken language, pai-hua… began to be used by a few scholar reformers and foreign missionaries in publishing periodicals, newspapers and other writings... (4) In the field of literary theory, the concept that literature should be “for the description of life” and that each generation had its own literature was propounded by Wang Kuo-wei (1877-1927)... (5) A few systems for alphabetizing Chinese were developed by scholars.” 270-271

219 Chow, 170.

220 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 169.

221 Ibid., 167, 173.

222 Ibid., 39, 176.

223 Hou, 131.

224 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 365.
“religion,” Mei saw himself as the vanguard of spreading the gospel of American Humanism in China; his mission, the “Chinese advocacy of humanism (original in English).” In other words, Mei hoped to become China’s own Babbitt.

C. A Confucian Humanist’s Attacks on the New Culturists

Mei’s most urgent task in “the defense of the Chinese tradition (original in English)” was to fight the trend being promoted by the New Culturists to scuttle Confucian tradition rather than establish a Confucian society. He first attacked the theory of evolution, which Babbitt had identified as the central idea of modern humanitarianism. In a letter to Hu Shi, Mei admitted that he only partly accepted the idea of progress. He wrote: “It is problematic that you worship the current century too much, believing all aspects of human civilization to be progressive. I do not believe so. Science and practical knowledge such as politics and economics may progress; Art, literature, and morality do not…” Addressing the role of sages, he pointed out, somewhat provocatively: “Genius is, in the current sense of the word progress, unprogressive (original in English).”

Turning to literature, Mei enlisted Hazlitt to support his attack on “the theory of literary evolution.” In Mei’s view, successive changes in the development of literary styles function as additions to the previously existing styles rather than substitutes. “Literary styles vary, and each has its own merit; they must not be replaced or mixed up, because they are worthy of being independent and coexistent.” By implication, Mei was defending the coexistence of classical Chinese and vernacular Chinese, questioning the validity of Hu’s reasons for replacing literary language with a vernacular. In a private letter to Hu, Mei, adopting a very traditional view, insisted that classical Chinese should be used in poetry and prose while vernacular Chinese should be restricted to novels and drama.

Mei believed that accepting the theory of evolution typically led to relativism. Arguing by analogy, humanists asserted that evolution denied the validity of the accumulated wisdom of the past. Mei employed the argument between Socrates and the sophist Protagoras to expose the problem of relativism among the New Culturists. “If each man has his own truth, then there will be no distinction between the wise and the ignorant. But how is it possible for Protagoras to be a teacher who forces people to follow his teachings?” Continuing in this vein, Mei raised an intriguing question: if writers were encouraged to disregard the practice of imitation and ignore proven models and rules in the name of individualistic creativity, how could the New Culturists establish new guidelines for others to follow while remaining hostile to writers of classical prose? Mei concluded that the New Culturists “are not thinkers, but sophists,” the same term that by Babbitt used to disparage the naturalists.

225 Ibid.
226 Ibid. 371.
227 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 166.
228 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 367.
230 Ibid.
231 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 168, 170.
232 Rosen, 45.
According to Mei, by embracing the theory of progress and all its relativist implications, Hu ended up revering “the new” and especially novelties imported from the West, which inevitably led to Hu neglecting not only his own native traditions but also neglecting the ancient civilization of the West. For this reason, Mei labeled Hu’s westernization as a “false westernization” and as “non-selective cosmopolitanism (original in English).” Mei criticized the New Culturists for focusing only on what is contemporary. From a humanist perspective, Mei believed that the theories popular in Europe and America would not withstand the test of history and that they would ultimately prove to be erroneous and ephemeral. For Mei, Hu’s obsession with “the new” merely transferred the negative trends of modern European history to China.

For Mei, Western civilization, just like Chinese civilization, was created through the accumulation of a long history; therefore, any evaluation of western culture should be based on extensive and holistic study. “Western civilization has without doubt a slowly and painfully accumulated background of its own. It cannot be regarded as the exclusive creation of the efforts of science and democracy in the last two centuries or so, however splendid and fruitful these efforts may have been (original in English).” Mei stated that cultural importation as prescribed by the New Culturists was ill-balanced since they only focused on the theories and the practices of modern European and American thinking. As a result, the New Culturists misrepresented western culture by “ignoring and depreciating the value of the antecedent achievements” of the West. While acknowledging the merits of John Dewey and Bertrand Russell, Mei still questioned if they could represent the essence of the whole of western civilization. In addition, Mei criticized Hu for choosing the wrong elements of contemporary western intellectual schools. “Discussing politics, they prefer the Russian model; in economics, they chose the socialism of Marx; in philosophy, they revere experimentalism; in western literature, they imitate the recent Decadent movement.” Equipped with his own preference of the American Humanism, Mei pointed out that “The various isms that are popular among Chinese and are taken by them as ‘the trend of the world’ are indeed only some westerners’ belief. Those who are disinterested in them and those who have pronounced their opposition are actually the majority.”

Mei identified utilitarianism as another factor in the loss of principles. For Mei, Hu’s advocacy of vernacular Chinese is an expression of Hu’s eagerness to cater to the will of the majority. In addition, Mei believed that Hu sought “temporary expedience” through temporary remedies “without consideration of everlasting truth.” Mei believed that this new learning

234 Ibid., 227.
235 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 371.
236 Mei, Letters, 193.
237 Ibid., 222.
238 Levenson, Liang Ch’i-ch’ao, 215.
239 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 370.
240 Ibid.
242 Mei, “Zijue yu mangchong,” Minxin zhoubao 1 no. 7 (1920).
243 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 178.
244 Ibid.
often was based on “fashionableness and opportuneness,” resulting in shallowness.\(^{245}\) Furthermore, Mei believed that the new scholars’ experiment with the educational system was doomed and that once it failed, they would change their positions under the flag of “cater(ing) to the needs of the time and circumstances.”\(^{246}\) For Mei, utilitarianism led scholars to constantly change their positions as they opportunistically conformed to societal trends. These ever-changing positions would ultimately undermine any learning of wisdom that transcended time and space.

In addition, although Mei realized the need for China to advance in the various fields of science, he expressed his discomfort with scientism. In September, 1916, he participated in the annual meeting of the Chinese Science society (\textit{Kexueshe}) held at Andover. He made a speech in which he described the nature of scholarly societies. He expressed his wish that the Society of Science advance scholarship and abide by the principle of benefiting the public.\(^{247}\) Yet, Mei’s active participation in the Society of Science demonstrates his belief in the importance of scientific development. In fact, Mei deemed professionals such as scientists and jurists as part of the new intellectual class whom he believed to be the hope of China’s future.\(^{248}\)

On the other hand, Mei disapproved of the tendency of science to step into fields beyond its expertise. He vented his discontent in one of his speeches: “Nowadays in China, science is everything… It is dangerous that those scientists only know their chosen career and completely neglect classical literature. Science provides men the natural law rather than the human law… It only gives men knowledge, but it cannot give men wisdom…”\(^{249}\) Perceiving the limitations of science outside its labs and the danger of specialization in modern education, Mei was convinced that classical literature was vital because it taught people how to become a “perfect man.”\(^{250}\)

Mei also focused his criticism on Populism. He saw a parallel development in the rising power of the masses in both China and the West. He perceived this development as a threat that needed to be controlled rather than utilized. Mei concluded that the contemporary West was living in an age in which the sages were dueling against the masses and that the survival of culture depended on its outcome.\(^{251}\) Speaking as a member of the traditional ruling class, Mei noted a fundamental essential change in Chinese society: “Since the founding of the Republic, the power to determine political success has fallen into the hands of the masses.”\(^{252}\) He was convinced that Hu’s advocacy of vernacular Chinese was a ploy to gain power and fame through a mobilization of the masses. Borrowing the term “Middle Class liberalism” from Mathew Arnold, whose works served as one of the key intellectual resources of Humanism, Mei believed that Hu’s cultural movement was merely a movement of philistines, undermining the aristocratic proclivities of Humanism whose tenets apply “not to men in general but only to a select few.”\(^{253}\)

Mei found support for elitism in both Confucianism and Babbittian humanism. He pointed out that Mencius had divided mankind into two groups: “those who labor with their mind

\(^{245}\) Mei, “A Critique of the New Culturists,” 224.
\(^{246}\) Ibid, 227.
\(^{247}\) Guangdi Mei and Yuanren Zhao, “Yanjianghui jishi,” \textit{Kexue} 3, no. 1 (January 1917), 82.
\(^{248}\) Mei, \textit{Letters}, 213.
\(^{250}\) Ibid.
\(^{251}\) Mei, \textit{Mei Guangdi}, 23.
\(^{252}\) Mei, “A Critique,” 223.
\(^{253}\) Babbitt, 74.
rule others, and those who labor with their physical strength are ruled by others (original in English).”

Babbitt too emphasized the aristocratic nature of humanism. For Mei, “there is an eternal conflict between the few and the many (original in English).” Mei pitted the common people against the intellectual class. He was convinced that true scholars were only a minority of the population and that they should be the leaders and the vanguard of culture. He also believed that the common people were often possessed by the “herd instinct” and had “no ability to judge and select the teachings that come to them.” Mei did however depart from the traditional elevation of literary intellectuals to positions of leadership insofar as he was willing to share leadership with other categories of intellectuals such as scientists and jurists who could “have an equal share of the attention and honor of society without granting the monopoly of these things to any single [group] (original in English).”

Mei reproached Hu for mainly focusing on the defects of Chinese tradition. He pointed out that “The New Culturists make it their mission to overthrow the ancients and all established institutions, falsely charging that their own country has no culture and that their traditional literature is dead literature.” In Mei’s opinion, Hu’s actions could only lead to “a break with the Chinese” and a break with the humanist past. Hu seems to identify it, the “essence,” with the West. Hu’s tendency to negate the value of the old in both China and the West while substituting novel western imports made Hu, in Mei’s judgment, an enemy of the humanist from both Chinese and western perspectives.

Mei criticized the New Culturists’ tendency to adopt the very kinds of radicalism that humanists sought to contain. While Mei approved of reform, he found Hu’s radical reforms far beyond what he was prepared to accept. In July, 1916, Mei expressed his disagreement with Hu’s approach to literary revolution, writing that “the revolution you talked about will totally overthrow the literature of our country. Is it proper to not to distinguish the main body from corrupt practices? I originally agreed with the literature revolution you described. However, I cannot agree with your radical approach that confuses the essence of our literature with its corrupt practices.” Hu’s iconoclastic advocacy for using vernacular Chinese instead of classical language was clearly far too radical for Mei.

Mei could not approve “such an uncompromising Westernization of Chinese life and thought (original in English)” because he was convinced that it risked sacrificing the cultural identity and independence of the Chinese and that, at best, it would turn them into the imitators of the Europeans and Americans. Mei was determined to avoid a Chinese future in which “China becomes an appendage of Europe. Its civilization will be a European civilization lived by

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254 Mei, Letters, 232.
255 Mei, “Chapter XV,” 125.
256 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 22.
258 Ibid., 213.
259 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 20.
261 Levenson, Liang Ch’i-ch’ao, 215.
262 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 165.
263 Ibid., 165.
264 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 370.
265 Ibid. 16.
the Chinese people.” If they followed Hu, the Chinese would become “denationalized hybrids, or at best second-rate Europeans and Americans… (original in English)” Although Mei believed that it was necessary to make cultural borrowings from the West, he insisted that China not only needed to survive physically but also spiritually.

Mei criticized the tendency towards dualistic extremes and advocated a middle path. Mei pointed out:

Much of our contemporary Voltairianism is unavoidable and necessary in this period of renaissance. The grip of custom has been too tenacious upon us, and to shake it off requires an explosion of volcanic force and brilliancy. But the virtue of moderation is easily lost sight of, especially in the midst of turmoil and excitement; we act on the impulse of the moment and are liable to oscillate from the extreme of servile imitation of the past to the extreme of iconoclasm (original in English).

Given his linkage of Voltaire with the French Revolution, Mei acknowledged the spirit of revolution while warning of the danger of the extremes of both traditionalists and iconoclasts. Mei criticized what he considered as the historical practice of academic hegemony and the current extreme academic freedom. “The malaise of the academic hegemony is that there is no room for development; the malady of the extreme freedom in academic thoughts is like unmanageable raging waves, which is equally harmful to the academic hegemony.” He identified the extreme freedom with the late Zhou and present-day Euro-America, and the hegemony with the post-Qin China and medieval Europe. Mei warned: “The problem of being the servants to the ancients is equal to being the servants to freedom in lacking thoughts of one’s own and only echoing the views of others.”

Mei’s middle way was based on the supreme law of the humanist, the concept of “Zhongyong” or in Babbitt’s terminology, “nothing too much.” Regarding to Chinese cultural legacy, Mei advocated “the virtue of moderation (original in English)” in reform and the Humanist “principle of selection (original in English).” He believed that “neither the standpatter nor the Jacobin is a safe person to be entrusted with the destiny of our nation (original in English).” Regarding to the freedom of academic thoughts, Mei was concerned with excessive liberalism:

What I loathe the contemporary people are not their ‘liberalism,’ but the corrupt practices resulted from the excessive practice of liberalism. Liberalism may lead to the confusion of the true and the false and the inversion of the right and the wrong in

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267 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 373.
270 Mei, *Mei Guangdi*, 150.
271 Mei, *Mei Guangdi*, 166.
272 Ibid., 166.
Mei was convinced that “the hope of the advance of culture only lies in making even of the academic hegemony and the academic freedom.”  

For Mei, “everything needs to return to “the doctrine of the mean.”” However, he acknowledged that man “wanders from one extreme to the other and seldom maintains the central position or the middle course. Just as the golden rule ‘nothing too much’ was never fulfilled by the ancient Greeks, so has the Confucian doctrine of the mean remained with us merely an ideal (original in English).” Lamenting that zhongyong, or the doctrine of the mean, remains an ideal that could hardly ever be achieved, Mei still insisted that striving for such balance was highly desirable.

D. The Causes of the Criticism

What Mei criticized and how he applied his criticism reveals the underlying causes of his intellectual duel with the New Culturists and Hu Shi in particular. This essay agrees with Huang Xingtao that the primary driver of Mei’s duel with Hu was Mei’s profound respect for elements of the Chinese tradition that he saw Hu undermining. Current scholars may disagree on the degree to which the mainstream ideas of the New Culture Movement were anti-tradition, but Mei Guangdi had no doubt that he and Hu each viewed “the old” differently and the New Culturists revolt against Chinese tradition involved wholesale westernization. Mei believed the transcendental values in Chinese culture should serve as the solid foundation for China’s future. In his words, “the best elements in the native tradition are the only sound basis for the building up of a new China (original in English).”

Mei was convinced that Hu was to destruct the Chinese cultural legacy to give birth to a new China. For Mei, the radicalism, wholesale westernization, and populism advocated by Hu could only result in the destruction of Chinese tradition. Mei’s opposition on this ground lay at the heart of his intellectual debate and motivated Mei to actively recruit Chinese students to join in his fight against the New Culturists including Hu. Mei was anxious about the potentially destructive power of such a “total cultural revolution (original in English)” and he was convinced that discrediting Chinese cultural heritage to such a radical extent would deliver the final blow to Chinese self-esteem and would amount to “Chinese Suicide (original in English)” rather than “Chinese Renaissance (original in English).” One suspects that even without the theoretical apparatus of Humanism, Mei would still have quarreled with Hu if only because his identity as Chinese man and scholar was intrinsically tied to the Confucian tradition.

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276 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 166.
277 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 168.
278 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 168.
279 Ibid, 192.
281 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 371.
282 Xingtao Huang, 96.
283 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 370.
284 Ibid.
Attributing the passions of this intellectual duel solely to the two contestands’ differing attitudes to tradition is too simplistic a reduction. Mei’s study of and with Babbitt instilled in him a way of looking at the world and man’s place in the world that endured for the rest of his life. It was this distinctive humanist vision that made Hu’s perceived faults loom so horribly large in Mei’s eyes. When Mei criticized Hu and the New Culturists he was attacking positions that all humanists disapproved of and detested. When his Professor Babbitt identified the adversaries of the humanist, he wrote: “The chief enemies of the humanist are the pragmatists and other philosophies of flux…” Seen through Mei’s humanist lens, Hu’s preference for vernacular Chinese poetry, his pragmatism, radicalism, and utilitarianism not only undermined the humanist traditions of both China and the West but violated the very principles that Mei and Babbitt held so dear. Mei was convinced that China could ill afford Hu’s culturally destructive experiments based on modern American theories and bristled at the notion of using Chinese society as a “laboratory” for those theories. He especially resented the fact that these dangerous experiments were being conducted under the banner of cultural reconstruction. In short, Mei identified Hu as an enemy of humanists, ill at ease with his anti-traditionalist stance and his embrace of modern “isms.”

III. Being “neither standpatter nor Jacobin:” Mei’s vision of modernizing China

From the previous two sections, we can see that Mei, in the second stage of his intellectual development, had assumed a humanist identity. Mei’s Confucian humanism centered on three key humanistic elements: cultural syncretism, anti-anti-traditionalism, and a loathing for Humanitarianism. In order to capture the essence of Mei’s cultural ideas, it is crucial to examine his thoughts from a humanist perspective to discover the underlying principles that shaped his thinking on these three key elements.

Borrowing from American Humanism enabled Mei to be simultaneously both traditional and modern. According to Hoeveler, “By temperament and doctrine, the New Humanists were defenders of tradition. The sense of the past and the search for the best within it offered one of the surest restraints against the appeal of the moment.” In American Humanism, Mei found a way to legitimize his defense of the Confucian tradition as a campaign for a humanist tradition in the east. Mei’s anti-anti-traditionalism is the manifestation of his affirmation of the values of “the old” Confucian humanist tradition amidst prevalent trend towards the anti-traditionalism of the New Culturists.

Borrowing from American Humanism had the added benefit of clothing Mei’s approach in modern garb. As an intellectual school of the modern United States, Babbitt’s criticism of the prevailing modern values of romantic individualism and naturalistic pragmatism can be seen as iconoclastic. In this sense, by identifying Hu as a modern humanitarian and campaigning intensely against him made Mei appear even more modern than the “up-to-the-minute modernists

286 Mei, Letters, 192.
287 Hoeveler, 86
288 Rosen, 16.
as Dr. Hu Shih (original in English).”289 One prominent Chinese scholar has pointed out that the rise of postmodernism in China has close theoretical links with the legacy of Xueheng.290

Cultural syncretism of the humanist tradition that could travel both East and West offered Mei an approach that recognized the universality of Confucian tradition while acknowledging its value for being distinctly Chinese in the world family of the humanist tradition. It allowed China to make cultural imports from the west while still allowing China to preserve the core of its own tradition. In other words, cultural syncretism of humanist traditions adopts a position somewhere between wholesale westernization and an inflexible commitment to China’s cultural legacy.

The single thread linking all three key elements of Mei’s thinking is a middle way approach, a manifestation of the Humanist law of measure or the Confucian doctrine of the mean. Mei attempted to face the challenge of his time in a way that was both traditional and modern, both universal and distinctively Chinese, and both western and native. While acknowledging the necessity of change, Mei stressed the importance of historical continuity, seeking a balanced middle way in the reconstruction of the “New Culture.” In Mei’s own words, “while not unmindful of the many and grave defects of their national tradition, the writers for The Critical Review are convinced that the more urgent task, at least for the moment, is rather a reconsideration of its achieved merits in order to restore to the modern Chinese a measure of balance and self-possession which these writers believe to be the prerequisites not only for a genuine cultural renaissance, but for a judicious reception of whatever advantageous and assimilable things Western culture may have to offer to China (original in English).”291 Avoiding the extremes and seeking to be “neither the standpatter nor the Jacobin (original in English),”292 Mei found a middle way to realize his vision for China’s future.

Mei’s middle path comports with American Humanism, the proclamations of Xueheng, and Mei’s own assessment of Xueheng. Babbitt defined the law of measure as the key tenet of American Humanism: “For most practical purpose, the law of measure is the supreme law of life, because it bounds and includes all other laws.”293 Xueheng declared its position as: “one of moderation, and of the golden mean in intellectual and cultural matters.”294 Mei deemed the program of Xueheng as “moderate and uncontroversial enough (original in English)” and explained why Xueheng risked being considered as reactionary: “But in a country like China at the present, where moderation is a lost virtue, it is taken as a counsel either of excessive timidity or of hide-bound reaction (original in English).”295

We should be cautious about labeling Mei a “cultural conservative,” a term regularly applied to the Xueheng scholars in most scholarly articles. While it is easy to call opponents of the New Culturists “conservative,” such simplistic labeling risks obscuring the essence of Mei’s cultural thinking and its less conservative aspects. In claiming that he was restoring original Confucianism, Mei obliterated its two thousand years of historical practice. While disapproving of many aspects of the May Fourth iconoclasts such as the elimination of classical Chinese, Mei

290 Yi Li, Xiandaixing: Pipan de pipan-Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu (Renmin wenxue zhubanshe, 2006), 99.
291 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 371.
292 Mei, Letters, 192.
293 Babbitt, Literature, 23.
294 Wang, 271.
295 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 371.
shared their greater agenda of reconstructing a new culture and positioned himself as an active contributor to that goal. In “A Critique of the New Culturists,” he wrote: “Everyone realizes the necessity of constructing a new culture… [I]s the establishment of a true new culture hopeless? To this I would say: ‘Not so. I would… make some… suggestions in this respect.’”

It appears that Mei deemed himself a reformer rather than a conservative. In one entry of his diary written about seven months before his death, Mei wrote: “The character of our people is not used to carrying out drastic reforms; therefore, they cannot develop into modern citizens. In this age of tough competition, such nationality will be eliminated…” Mei lamented the resistance to change that afflicted his fellow countrymen, and in that sense, Mei seemed to identify himself as someone eager for change, and thus the antithesis of a conservative. Considering Mei a conservative vis-à-vis the New Culturists not only obscures his humanist identity with the doctrine of the mean as the key principle, but disguises the reformist spirit of his thinking.

Chen Lai warned his readers of the potential danger of such simplistic labeling: “It is often those claiming to be revolutionaries who label people of a different viewpoint as ‘counter-revolutionaries.’” Regarding Xueheng, “the declared antagonism of the Critical Review group to the New Culture movement is often perceived as the conservative strain in modern Chinese history. The danger of this reading is that one easily falls into the rhetorical trap of their opponents, the New Culturists, who were the first to brand the group as a roadblock to social progress.”

The quarrel between Mei and Hu represents divergent native Chinese intellectual forces that were actively seeking solutions for modern China’s perceived ills. Both were concerned with China’s future, which mandated an evaluation of the Chinese cultural legacy, and both recognized the necessity of constructing a new culture. What differentiated them was their opposing views on “the old” and “the new.” For Mei, the New Culturists were wrong with “A preoccupation with the defects of this tradition and an advocacy of a cheap and unselective cosmopolitanism as its substitute… (original in English).” If Hu, in negating certain values of the Chinese cultural legacy, adopted a stance that was anti-traditional, Mei’s stance, characterized by a selective attitude toward China’s heritage, was in great part defined by his “anti-anti-traditionalist” reaction to the New Culturists. Although Mei and Hu resembled one another in their willingness to import elements of other cultures, they disagreed over what fruit to pick from the tree of the modern West.

Mei and Hu had each become the representatives of different western intellectual schools in China. Mei became the Chinese face of Babbitt’s Humanism while Hu was the champion of Dewey’s Pragmatism. Although Mei elevated Babbitt to the status of a “sage,” in the unique conditions of Republican China Mei’s thinking on such questions as the fate of tradition in modern times made him his master’s equal. And given his broader Humanist perspective, Mei’s

297 Chen, 128.
298 Lydia Liu, 250.
299 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 371.
300 Chen, 130.
defense of tradition had universal applications not just for China but for the West as well. Like Babbitt, Mei was a “global critic of modernity.”

Chen Lai elucidated the complex relationship between native Chinese intellectual trends and trends in the West:

The tensions and divisions of the New Culture Movement, its changes and developments, were not all born and developed independently within the Chinese cultural circumstances. Rather, the intellectuals who criticized and acknowledged the flaws of western culture as well as their critical arguments, while partly influenced by social changes within China itself, were for the most part directly related to the state of western society, to the criticisms of western culture voiced by western intellectuals and to the emergence of socialist thought. In this respect, the criticism of western culture by Chinese intellectuals was also undertaken under the influence of western culture.

This essay disagrees with Huang’s conclusion that Mei’s thinking followed a ti-yong approach. First, in comparing Mei to such ti-yong promoters as Zhang Zhidong, Mei’s different historical context gave his conservatism a different meaning. While Zhang pointed out the necessity of preserving the Chinese essence, Zhang was more noted among his contemporaries for his reformist measures; by contrast, while Mei agreed with the necessity of reform, his defense of the Chinese cultural legacy placed him on the conservative side of the debate with his contemporaries. While the comparison is instructive, it is not fully justified to evaluate the thoughts of Mei through the lens of an historical concept more appropriate to an earlier time.

Second, Mei’s cultural thinking significantly differs from the views of promoters of zhong ti xi yong like Zhang. Although Mei sought to preserve Confucianism, his ultimate goal was much greater than merely the survival and the revival of Confucianism. As a faithful follower of Babbitt’s American Humanism, Mei’s cultural syncretism was intended to benefit not just China but the world. Within Zhang’s ti-yong approach, Zhang assumed an inequality between native Chinese and western ideas. By contrast, Mei viewed western and Chinese civilization as equivalent, which allowed him to incorporate in his thinking a critique of both Chinese and western ethnocentrism. In assessing those Chinese intellectuals who “select[ed] the best in east and west,” Levenson wrote that their “willingness to pool the resources of the two civilizations was to be a genuine willingness, without the reservation of the culturalistic t’i-yong westernizers, who always grudgingly added that the western best was a poor one.”

Third, Mei’s evaluation of Chinese ti was highly critical. He challenged the validity of two thousand years of Chinese establishment Confucian practices, reserving his praise almost exclusively for what he considered original Confucianism. His self-described rejection of that history reveals that he was thoroughly alienated from Confucian orthodoxy. In addition, Mei had no desire to uphold the imperial political system. He was a member of Nanshe, which promoted anti-Manchu ideas.

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302 Chen, 148.
303 Levenson, Confucian China, 109.
Fourth, unlike other ti-yong promoters, Mei found it acceptable to enrich the Chinese ti with western contributions. Since he found essential unity in both Chinese and western humanistic traditions, he was convinced that China and the west could enrich and support each other. Mei distinguished himself from the ti-yong scholars by actively advocating Chinese Confucian values to the west. In that, his worldview proved to be much more open and inclusive than Zhang’s.

In his Anti-Modernization Tide in the World: On Cultural Conservatism, Guy Alitto judged that Mei’s conservatism was a manifestation of “anti-modernization (反现代化),” belonging to the anti-western camp (排西派).\textsuperscript{304} Mei, however, refused to equate modernization and westernization. He waged a war neither against modernity nor against the west in general but rather sought to avoid the negative elements of western modernization. Mei’s acceptance and the advocacy of the New Humanism demonstrated that he was willing to infuse “fresh energy and blood from Western culture (original in English),”\textsuperscript{305} deeming it “a welcome opportunity for expansion and self-improvement (original in English)” of the Chinese cultural tradition.\textsuperscript{306} Advocating “universal-mindedness,” Mei identified the present “desideratum is … a process of harmonization, not of antagonism (original in English).”\textsuperscript{307} In addition, although Mei disparaged the idea of progress, he did not dismiss the potential of progress to expand “practical knowledge.” Although he disparaged scientism, he still recognized the necessity for modern China to pursue scientific study. Although he criticized the utilitarianism that he considered pervasive in contemporary society, he not only recognized the existence of a “modern China,” he also strongly supported modernization as the path China should take.

For Mei, strengthening the body did not necessarily mean having to lose the soul, which, in application, meant that modernization without a total rupture from tradition was not just necessary but also possible. Mei asked: “If man is perpetually told to deny his own past and place no confidence in what he has achieved, what meaning and purpose can life offer him in the future (original in English)?”\textsuperscript{308} Viewing the modern world as a world of nations in which the culture of a people served as the foundation of its identity, Mei sought a Chinese version of the modern rather than committing to the western model.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{304} Guy Alitto, \textit{Shijie fanweinei de fan xian daihua sichao} (Guizhou: Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 1991), 5.
  \item \textsuperscript{305} Mei, \textit{Letters}, 194.
  \item \textsuperscript{306} Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 372.
  \item \textsuperscript{307} Mei, \textit{Letters}, 194.
  \item \textsuperscript{308} Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 367.
\end{itemize}
Chapter Three: the Answers for the Challenges of the Age

I. Introduction

In the current historiography, Chinese intellectuals like Liang Qichao, Zhang Binglin, Du Yaquan, Liang Shuming, and Mei Guangdi are commonly lumped together and labeled as cultural conservatives. The basis for this grouping is based on their commonalities. For example, Guy S. Alitto points out in his *Shijie fanweinei de fan xiandaihua sichao: lun wenhua shoucheng zhuyi* (the Anti-Modernization Tide in the World: On Cultural Conservatism) that “these thinkers proposed a harmony of Chinese and western culture and proposed that the future world civilization should be a synthesis of Chinese and Western culture.” Liu Lihong observes that these intellectuals commonly advocated the selective preservation of traditional culture, reflected on modern western industrial civilization, and promoted a syncretism of East and West as well as “old” and “new” as the means of constructing a “New Culture.”

Zheng Dahua, the author of *Liang Shuming and Hu Shi: A Comparison between the Intellectual Trend of Cultural Conservatism and Westernization*, itemized three defining ideas of the cultural conservatives: (1) Although they would acknowledge the superiority of Western culture in certain areas, on the whole, they insisted that Chinese “spiritual” culture was still superior to the Western “material” culture. (2) Although they criticized traditional culture, that critique was predicated on a desire to protect that culture. (3) Although they did not oppose the introduction of Western culture, they insisted that, in this synthesis, Chinese culture must still dominate in a way that achieved a kind of zhong-ti xi-yong mixture.

Other scholars define the cultural conservatives by contrasting their shared characteristics with the cultural radicalism of the time. For example, Feng Tianyu, the author of *a Critical Biography of Zhang Zhidong*, points out the differences between the two groups: “(1) Cultural conservatism is opposed to rapid change and favors gradual change, gradual progress; (2) cultural conservatism is opposed to complete change, …. accepting that some levels of culture are merely means, and some externalities of the system can be, indeed must be, changed. Some levels such as moral norms and the core of the system cannot, and should not, be changed; (3) cultural conservatism does not on the whole affirm the universality of culture and human nature but recognizes the national and country-bound nature of culture…”

Alitto and Zheng emphasized the common traits of these intellectuals in order to help readers better grasp the general intellectual trends of the May Fourth Movement. These intellectuals were the products of an age of crisis in which they actively sought solutions to the
challenges of their times. Their common concerns fall into four key categories: their evaluations of Chinese tradition; their relations with the New Culturists; their views of the people; and their attitude towards the West. In these areas, Mei’s thinking reflects the common concerns of Chinese conservatives. On the other hand, grouping these intellectuals under the general rubric of “conservatives” tends to minimize their differences. Even though these intellectuals share important traits, a comparison of their thoughts reveals that their differences run much deeper than might be evident if we uncritically subscribe to the views of the scholars summarized above.

Comparing Mei Guangdi, Liang Qichao, and Liang Shuming illustrates their common concerns, but also exposes the uniqueness of Mei’s cultural views and the heterogeneity among these so-called “cultural conservatives.” Although Liang Qichao, Liang Shuming, and Mei Guangdi resemble one another in their efforts to uphold Chinese Confucian tradition, they differ significantly in their proposed solutions for contemporary Chinese society, their intellectual relations with the New Culturists, their views towards the masses, and their assessments of western modernity. A closer examination of the Critical Review School’s contribution to the conservative movement further highlights Mei’s distinctive positions on these issues.\(^{314}\)

The primary sources needed to distinguish among the “conservatives” must include Liang Qichao’s *Ou you xin ying lu* (Reflections on a European Journey), published in 1919, and Liang Shuming’s popular *Dongxi wenhua ji qizhe zue* (Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies), published in 1921. Levenson considered Liang Qichao “a brilliant scholar, journalist, and political figure, [who] contributed heavily to modern Chinese history.”\(^{315}\) According to Levenson, Liang Qichao went through three stages in his cultural thinking. In his early career, although Liang was a traditionalist, he nonetheless embraced the western idea of evolution which he applied to his analysis of the Chinese classics. From 1898 to 1919, Liang adopted a decidedly anti-Confucianist position. After touring postwar Europe, Liang Qichao published *Reflections on a European Journey* in 1919, in which he relied on his first-hand observations of the West to reassess modern civilization. His encounter with Europe left him feeling much more confident about Chinese civilization in general. Liang deemed the postwar West as merely a “materialistic” civilization, dominated by scientific thinking and an exploitive attitude toward nature, and doomed, by Darwinian logic, to endless conflict among its nations.

Liang Shuming’s *Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies* proved extremely popular; it was reprinted five times in its first year and translated into twelve languages.\(^{316}\) Even though Liang was criticized for being “sometimes self-contradicting,”\(^{317}\) his book remains a classic of twentieth century Chinese thought.\(^{318}\) Liang argued that the root of any given culture resides in “the unending will” of its people, and that “will” determines the direction of their culture, making it distinctive. He believed that civilizations develop in three stages, each stage distinguished by its correspondingly distinct subjective will. He characterized Western civilization as one based on struggle, its people aggressively pursuing their desire for change. By contrast, he characterized Chinese civilization as one in which people moderated their desires to adapt to circumstances, thereby achieving an internal balance and equilibrium between nature

\(^{314}\) Woei, 71.
\(^{315}\) Levenson, *Liang Ch’i-ch’ao*, vii.
\(^{317}\) Wakeman, x.
\(^{318}\) Chen, 128.
and society. He characterized Hindu civilization as one that renounced desire. Liang concluded that these three cultures differed profoundly in their respective wills: Western culture was dominated by a will to progress; Chinese culture embraced the will to compromise and find the middle ground; Indian culture was suffused with the will to reflect upon oneself.\textsuperscript{319}

II. The Relevancy of Chinese Tradition to Modernity

Liang Qichao, Liang Shuming, and Mei Guangdi all share one essential characteristic: they all affirm certain elements of Chinese tradition. All three shared a conviction that the rejuvenation of China mandated a positive role for Chinese Confucian tradition in China’s modernization process. For these scholars, “heritage possessed not just historical but trans-historical significance.”\textsuperscript{320} Mei firmly believed that “there must be things within our culture as it is that can be amplified and made imperishable.”\textsuperscript{321} For him, “the best elements in the native tradition are the only sound basis for the building up of the new China… (original in English).”\textsuperscript{322} Xueheng’s “central purpose [is] the defense of the Chinese tradition…. its position is Confucian (original in English).”\textsuperscript{323} In the early Republic, although Liang Qichao opposed reading the classics, he supported honoring Confucius, believing that his moral teachings were the moral foundation of the country and the core of the Chinese culture.\textsuperscript{324} Lamenting that “present-day Chinese students will not admit that China formerly had any worth-while thought.”\textsuperscript{325} Liang in the last decade of his life sought to “discover the ‘unique qualities’ of Chinese civilization” in order to fuse them with the positive ones of the West.\textsuperscript{326}

Liang Shuming saw himself as the promoter of Confucius in the modern era. When Liang went to Peking University in 1917, he told Chen Duxiu that he came to propagate the ideas of Buddha and Confucius,\textsuperscript{327} and later wrote: “Really, if it were not for my coming to propagate [Confucius], would there be [anyone] to do so?”\textsuperscript{328} Like Liang Qichao and Mei Guangdi, Liang Shuming believed in the relevance and compatibility of Confucianism with modernization.\textsuperscript{329} He argued that China could still preserve the heritage of the sages while acquiring wealth and power.\textsuperscript{330} In contrast to Mei’s more indirect defense of Confucianism, Liang Shuming’s promotion of Confucianism was direct and systematic.

Even while affirming the ultimate value of Confucian legacy, all three scholars blamed its historical practices as one source of China’s ills. In his earlier years, Liang Qichao, as a disciple of Kang Youwei, claimed that ignorant commentators had led to cumulative textual falsification, obscuring the authentic teaching of Confucius.\textsuperscript{331} Similarly, Mei blamed the decedents of

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{319} Chen, 142.
\bibitem{320} Alitto, 13.
\bibitem{321} Mei, “A Critique,” 227.
\bibitem{322} Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 371.
\bibitem{323} Ibid.
\bibitem{324} Chen, 111.
\bibitem{325} Levenson, \textit{Liang Ch'i-ch'ao}, 8.
\bibitem{326} Philip Huang, 147.
\bibitem{327} Chen, 130.
\bibitem{328} Alitto, 125.
\bibitem{329} Ibid., 121.
\bibitem{330} Ibid., 122.
\bibitem{331} Levenson, \textit{Liang Ch'i-ch'ao}, 2, 35.
\end{thebibliography}
Confucius for the more questionable Confucian practices. He accused the Han Confucians of being so intimidated by despotic rule that they distorted the original teachings of Confucius and the Song Confucians like Zhu Xi for turning Confucianism into something impractical for real life. For the rigorously Confucian Liang Shuming, people like Mei belonged to the clan of “ignorant people who insist on sloughing off responsibility by saying that it is not our culture that is bad, but just that it has been ruined by [the sages’] posterity.”

Liang Shuming saw the atrophy of China as the logical outcome of its culture. He wrote: “Actually, the Chinese [situation] today is due entirely to [our] own culture and there is no way to repudiate its faults.” In this criticism of the Chinese cultural legacy, Liang Shuming’s views resemble those of the New Culturists.

While all three of these thinkers are typically labeled as “conservative,” all three were highly critical of traditional practices that had accrued over the long course of Chinese history. Yet this somewhat “radical” critique of certain aspects of the Confucian legacy also freed them to argue that the teachings of Confucius and the wisdom of China’s ancient sages were not the cause of China’s current atrophy. Both Liang Qichao and Mei made a point of characterizing their mission as one of elucidating the original and the authentic Confucian teachings.

Liang Shuming’s approach was equally radical. Applying an intuitionist interpretation of Confucianism, he asserted that conventional Confucian practice over the past two thousand years was merely “anti-Confucian.” In an observation that could equally apply to Mei Guangdi, Alitto observed: “Liang Shuming’s intuitionist interpretation of Confucianism enabled him to relativize its concrete historical expressions… Relativism then allowed him to retain the underlying spirit of Confucianism, its absolute value… while dismissing the specific cognitive definitions for moral behavior derived from the absolute values as a perversion of the ‘true’ Confucianism.”

Liang Shuming identified the concept of ren as the essence of Confucianism. He believed that Confucius, from his deep study of Yi Jing, had truly grasped the nature of pure change and that intuition was the ultimate guide to a life of harmony with nature.

As regards to reinterpreting Confucianism, all three scholars gained inspiration from western theories. Liang Shuming’s “vitalist” reinterpretation of Confucianism eventually came under the influence of the Chinese Wang Yang-ming School and the theories of Bergson, as Liang believed that Bergson’s “anti-scientific intuitionism and his activism [were] the perfect companion to his own left-wing Wang Yan-ming Confucianism.” According to Levenson, Liang Qichao smuggled the western concept of historical progress into his reinterpretation of Confucian classics, and by having adopted a western concept of progress, his survey of Chinese intellectual history prompted him to “discover” democracy and science in the Chinese tradition.

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332 Alitto, 118.
333 Ibid.
334 Ibid., 84.
335 Ibid., 102,104,105.
336 Ibid., 102.
337 Ibid., 99.
338 Ibid., 73.
339 Ibid., 109.
340 Levenson. Liang Ch‘i-ch‘ao, 40.
Mei’s adoption of Babbitt’s perspectives allowed him to find “Confucian humanism (original in English)” woven into the fabric of China’s cultural history. Like the two Liangs, he too traced the source of this humanism to the original teachings of Confucius. By blaming the distortions of despotic rule under Qin and Han and the impracticality of the Confucianism as interpreted by Zhu Xi allowed Mei and his fellow conservative thinkers to claim that original Confucianism was not to blame for China’s current backwardness. At the same time, finding parallels for Confucianism in the western humanist tradition supported Mei’s claim that “true” Confucianism was both valid and universal. Embracing Humanism’s universalist predispositions, Mei felt comfortable in assessing conditions in the West as well as in China; he saw both China and the West as going through a phase in which sages were dueling with “ordinaries.” He shared Liang Shuming’s assessment that the West was experiencing a profound intellectual revolt.

Mei, Liang Qichao, and Liang Shuming, despite their deeply held convictions of the value of their Chinese cultural heritage, still looked for western parallels to justify their beliefs. Their propensity to turn to western authorities to defend their beliefs and reassure themselves that those beliefs were sound hints at just how insecure they were about their cultural legacy. According to Alitto: “The tremendous prestige of Western Ideas in post-May Fourth China led traditionalist thinkers of all shades into some strange contortions. Despite their antipathy toward things Western, they seemed to go to great lengths to try to tack the name of a Western thinker or theory onto the ideas in China’s past they wished to exonerate.” But despite these insecurities, all three felt sufficiently confident to assert that the universal values of Chinese civilization had the potential to rescue the West from its own malaise. Liang Qichao, in particular, took special satisfaction in those who believed that the West needed to look to the civilizations of the East, and Chinese civilization in particular, for their salvation. Liang wrote: “On the other shore of the ocean are millions of people bewailing the bankruptcy of [their] material civilization and crying piteously for help, waiting for us to save them!”

Mei, too, saw the potential of Chinese civilization as a tonic for the West. In an essay writing in English, Mei predicted that the West’s “mercantile domination” would lead to one of two inevitable consequences: “either toward inevitable destruction through incessant wars caused by commercial rivalry or toward a social condition so insipid and vulgarized that all the finer things in life will have no chance of survival (original in English).” He urged westerners to adopt the Confucian social order in which scholars rule from above and tradesman accept their place at the bottom. Mei practiced what he preached, teaching Chinese language and philosophy at Harvard and helping the Harvard University build its East Asian library. And, publishing in the English-language journals, The Bookman and The Nation, Mei made his case for the value of China’s cultural legacy to American readers, arguing that certain universal elements of the Chinese tradition transcended the boundaries of nation-states.

341 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 367.
342 Alitto, 109.
343 Alitto, 96.
344 Alitto, 116; Song Chen, Wusi qianhou dong xi wenhua wenti lunzhan wenxuan (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1989), 349.
345 Mei, “Is the west awakening?” 448.
346 Ibid.
347 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 117.
Both Liang’s and Mei’s suggestions for the west, which so many of their contemporaries only admired, reveal their belief that the universality of elements of Chinese tradition could transcend the boundaries of nation-states and benefit it. Acknowledging the universality both of Western and Chinese culture, Liang Shuming’s proposed a “three path” theory of cultural development. According to Liang, each path had its own inherent validity, but he saw each as being temporally appropriate. There was a fruitful era for each path. For example, he “shift[ed] the grounds for affirming western culture to the ‘present’ time axis and moved the grounds for affirming Chinese and Indian culture to the ‘future’ time axis.” In Liang’s formulation, for now, China needed to take the Western path if it was to advance into a future in which its Confucian values could be realized. He also held that the West needed to be guided by the values of Chinese culture, boldly predicting that western culture would experience this transformation. He stated bluntly that “the future world culture would be a revival of Chinese culture.”

Asserting the universal appropriateness of Confucius’ teachings, Liang asserted that “Europeanization is universalization. The East also has what it takes to be universalized and Europe is not beyond its scope.” For him, Confucianism offered the best way to rescue not just the Chinese from their current mental chaos but westerners as well. He wrote: “I see the pitiful condition of the Westerners…, [who], desiring spiritual restoration, are running all over searching. It is really [a case of] ‘not yet learning the great doctrine.’ Should I not guide them to this path of Confucius? I also see Chinese slavishly imitating the shallowness of the West…[They too are] searching everywhere…. Should I not guide them to that best and most beautiful of lives, the Confucian one?”

Although current Chinese culture needed to adopt the western culture to complete the first stage the development of its civilizational, the currently obscured Confucian essence of that culture would prove invaluable in achieving the second phase of its cultural development.

Liang Shuming was far more critical of the current state of Chinese civilization than either Mei or Liang Qichao. According to Liang, culture had three aspects: the life of the spirit, social life, and material life. In all three aspects, Liang judged Chinese culture to be behind the West, especially when it came to meeting basic human needs. He even agreed with Chang Naide, an active member of the New Culture camp, that Chinese culture embraced the ancient while western culture embraced the present, and for that reason, China had not made the same progress as the West. To address China’s current material, spiritual, and social needs, China needed to adopt western notions of progress, science, and democracy. By contrast, Liang Qichao in his later years was much more affirmative about Chinese tradition. When he contrasted Chinese spirit and western materialism, he found Chinese civilization far superior. For his part, Mei Guangdi was far less concerned with such contrasts between China’s backwardness relative to the material achievements of modern western civilization. While he acknowledged the

348 Alitto, 99.
349 Chen, 142.
350 Alitto, 105, 106.
351 Chen, 129.
352 Alitto, 125.
353 Chen, 131.
354 Ibid.
obvious differences, Mei found those disparities far less relevant than the similarities and commonalities of the East and West.

Even in his youth, Mei saw the importance of “historical study (original in English)” in literature. His reinterpretation of Confucianism was guided by his awareness of history and the notion that literature served as the great repository of a given culture’s legacy. By contrast, Liang Shuming seems almost ahistorical. In his theory, “Confucian truth was seen as metaphysically detached from history, validated finally only by direct intuitive experience, and able to speak to theological problems of meaning more than social problems of choice. The ‘spiritual East’ had become a country of the heart.” He also found little of value in literary heritage. He disapproved of Mei and Liang Qichao’s methods, referring to their efforts as the mere “piling up of stiff rotten goods.” In place of history and literature, Liang Shuming embraced the countryside movement as the best way to realize his ideals.

In conclusion, Mei Guangdi, Liang Shuming, and Liang Qichao all defended the validity of Confucianism, but a Confucianism that they defined as preserving the original (or modernized) teachings of Confucius, rejecting the many and varied accretions to that tradition, which distorted its original message. They differed in the degrees to which they valued that tradition. All three relied on western theories in making their respective reinterpretations of Confucianism. All three also found universal principles in China’s Confucian legacy that could be applied to anyone, everywhere, and to every society.

III. Relations to the New Culturists

While Liang Qichao defended the value of Chinese tradition in his later years, his early radical critiques of tradition had greatly influenced the thinking of the New Culturists. From 1898 to 1919, Liang, who was born in 1873, arrived at an anti-Confucian stance that “justified theoretically the iconoclasm of student youth.” Liang was a radical pioneer among his contemporaries. The New Culturists carried on his radicalism, thus sharing both intellectual continuity and affinity with Liang in their intellectual genealogy. With his advocacy of Confucianism, Liang Shuming became the movement’s enemy even though he still identified himself with the New Culturists, rejecting the view that he was opposing to the movement. To Hu Shi he exclaimed: “According to their views I am an obstacle to them! I am an obstacle in the way of their reformist thought! How can I be worthy of such a position? It makes me sad. I do not believe that I am opposed to their movement!” In comparison to the wholesale westernizers and cultural blenders, according to Alitto, “Liang Shuming’s theory of culture was more compatible with that of the Chen Duxiu camp.” Chen Lai even concluded that “to say

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355 Mei, Letters, 193.
356 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 161.
357 Furth, 62.
358 Alitto, 8.
359 Ibid, 118.
360 Levenson, Liang Ch’i-ch’ao, 9.
361 Chen, 128.
362 Alitto, 82.
that Liang Shuming was a conservative, anti-modernist, anti-science and anti-democrat, is quite wrong.”

By contrast, Mei openly positioned himself in opposition to the New Culturists. Even during his student years at Harvard, Mei challenged Hu’s promotion of vernacular poems and literature. According to Wu Mi, the later chief editor of Xueheng, when he first met Mei, Mei was actively recruiting Chinese students to campaign against Hu’s influence.

Liang Qichao and Mei Guangdi were both alarmed by the radicalism of the New Intellectuals, and advocated a more moderate approach to cultural reconstruction. Liang Qichao had always been inclined to follow a “middle road.” During the May Fourth era, he chose to position himself between the radical “new youth” and the conservative traditionalists. Likewise, Mei also differentiated himself from both extremes; he saw danger in both “extreme servile imitation of the past” and “extreme iconoclasm.” In his view, embracing either extreme was merely to be enslaved to a different master, one ancient, the other western. When he finally launched his all-out attack on Hu’s New Culture movement, as we have seen from the previous chapter, Mei’s vision for a new culture was firmly grounded on “the virtue of moderation.”

Mei and Liang Qichao both insisted on gradualism. Mei condemned the New Culturists for seeking “temporary expedience… catering to the needs of the time and circumstances.” In his earlier private correspondence with Hu Shi, Mei confessed that “In regard to the literary revolution, I think our generation cannot accomplish it. It will take a hundred years or two hundred years to achieve the new literature.” Later, and in public, Mei pointed out that the fruits of cultural syncretism might not be noticeable for another forty or fifty years. For his part, Liang Qichao had opposed radical and revolutionary change and favored gradualism since as early as 1902. He believed that his project of educating Chinese youth to become “New Citizens” could only be realized in twenty or thirty years. While both Mei and Liang may have shared some of the ultimate goals of the New Culturists, they rejected the notion that these goals could be achieved rapidly.

In contrast to the gradualism of Mei and Liang, Liang Shuming appears much more radical, going so far as to openly praise his “arch-rival” Chen Duxiu’s idea of adopting Western culture in its entirety: “I cannot but praise and admire the clarity of Mr. Chen’s mind!... Mr. Chen ... sees that Western culture is an integrated whole that cannot be looked at superficially and piecemeal. Because of this awakening [of Chen’s], everyone now advocates that the best thing to have is a thought revolution, a culture movement.”

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363 Chen, 146.
364 Philip Huang, 142.
365 Ibid.
366 Mei, Letters, 190.
368 Mei, the Letters, 190.
370 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 161.
371 Ibid.
372 Huang, 142.
373 Huang, 148.
374 Alitto, 88
A particularly sticky concept for Mei and the two Liangs, especially in relation to the New Culturists, was the concept of progress, especially its intellectual linkage to the theory of evolution. As we have already pointed out, Mei flatly rejected the theory of evolution, chiefly for its implications for society and culture. For nearly two decades, Liang Qichao embraced a theory of progress, but the horrors of World War One made him begin to question the premises of Social Darwinism and its inherent law of progress. He came to believe that Social Darwinism and extreme individualism were the root cause of the war.\textsuperscript{375} He concluded that western progress was merely material, and that the idea that the West had also progressed socially or spiritually was an illusion.\textsuperscript{376} Applied to culture, the theory of evolution, especially in its Social Darwinist applications, tended to dismiss ideas of the past as having outlived their usefulness. Having rejected Social Darwinism, Liang decided that universal truth was the only reliable criterion by which to judge the value of ideas and that true progress demanded finding “the permanent values that appreciate with the passage of time.”\textsuperscript{377} Having become disaffected with the theory of evolution, Liang now saw the limitations of science in social development, writing “the Europeans have had an enormous dream about the omnipotence of science, and now they begin to decry its bankruptcy.”\textsuperscript{378} And yet, Liang Qichao did not completely abandon the notion of historical progress from his historical understanding.\textsuperscript{379} Instead, he proposed a revised version in which two movements are emphasized: “the movement toward equality and homogenization” and “the continuous production and appreciation of the cultural heritage of different traditions.”\textsuperscript{380}

The theory of progress loomed large in Liang Shuming’s thinking. In his \textit{Eastern and Western civilizations and their philosophies}, Liang envisioned humanity as evolving in three successive stages. In the first primitive stage, human beings seek to meet their primal needs for food and shelter. In the second, they face the problem of living satisfying lives. In the third stage, they achieve the ultimate joy of Nirvana through self-abnegation and rejection of worldliness.\textsuperscript{381} While there is no available evidence that Mei ever directly commented on Liang Shuming’s evolutionary scheme, it is highly doubtful that he would have approved, since Mei’s historical views always emphasized the constant in the flux. Liang Shuming did not believe that Chinese civilization could evolve, asserting that Chinese society would never develop science or democracy on its own. Given that China had encountered the West, Liang surmised the potentiality of radical change in Chinese civilization.

Mei’s critique of the theory of evolution was much more thorough. Unlike the two Liangs, Mei had never had real faith in its tenets. In his correspondence with Hu Shi, he stated that his belief that the development of art, literature, and morality was not progressive, since progress applied only to such practical knowledge as science. Against “the theory of literary evolution,” Mei argued that the successions of literary styles, such as the shift from classical prose to the vernacular, were mere additions to the existing body of literature not necessarily evolutionary

\textsuperscript{375} Levenson, \textit{Liang Ch’i-ch’ao}, 199.
\textsuperscript{376} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{377} Ibid. Philip Huang, 151.
\textsuperscript{379} Tang, 221.
\textsuperscript{380} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{381} Alitto, 83.
replacements and certainly not necessarily improvements. New did not necessarily mean better and true. The best works were those that expressed time-honored everlasting values regardless of when they were composed.

IV. Attitudes towards the Masses

After the fall of the old imperial political system, the status of the common people became an issue that every Chinese intellectual had to face. Liang Qichao and Liang Shuming saw the common people as a potentially useful force for change; Mei saw them as a potential problem for the new leadership. As early as the late nineteenth century, Liang Qichao was already paying attention to the problem of mass illiteracy, lamenting that “China, trumpeting its civilization to the five continents, has yet not attained to 20% literacy.” Fully aware of the fact that the classics were accessible only to the literate, he saw the cleavage between written and spoken Chinese primarily responsible for China’s educational backwardness. Teach the people to read and Chinese society would change for the better. Liang Shuming also saw the common people as the key to any New Culture Movement’s success. At the heart of Liang Shuming’s Rural Reconstruction movement was creating a widespread mass movement throughout Chinese society to restore practice of a “Confucian” way of life.

While Mei Guangdi was fully aware of the new influence of the masses, he held to his belief in “an eternal conflict between the few and the many.” By “the few,” he meant humanists or Junzi; by the many, he meant “the unreflective crowd …blessed with the herd instinct (original in English)” In his view, true humanists were the limited few in any society; the rest were “just common people, or the profane vulgar (original in English).” In an age that celebrated the masses, Mei insisted on elitism. To some extent, Mei’s attitude may be no more than an expression of the anxiety of the former ruling intellectual class losing its control over the masses as the masses (and those who claimed to speak for them) increasingly demanded more power in various fields. Before the elimination of the imperial examination system in which Mei excelled, it was easy to decide who should rule and who should be ruled. Still, Mei was not so locked in his elitism that he did not advocate popular education; however, he saw it only as a way to narrow the intellectual gap between the few and the many, between “the intellectual class (original in English)” and the masses. Unlike Liang, Mei did not link the literary use of classical Chinese with alleviating mass illiteracy. He also insisted that only China’s intellectual elite should be responsible for selecting what to import from the West.

Realizing the importance of style in reaching a broad general audience, Liang Qichao pioneered a new style of writing and assumed the role of “a popularizer of new ideas,” introducing the Chinese to such novel ideas as nationalism, imperialism, social Darwinism, and

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383 Levenson, Liang Ch’i-ch’ao, 48.
384 Ibid.
385 Alitto, 123, 124.
386 Mei, “Chapter XV,” 125.
387 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 369.
388 Mei, Mei Guangdi, 175.
389 Mei, Letters, 212.
390 Rosen, 27.
liberalism.\textsuperscript{391} As early as 1896, Liang was already advocating colloquial writing, predating the publication of Hu Shi’s “A Preliminary Discussion of Literature Reform” by more than two decades.\textsuperscript{392} Seeing the split between spoken and written language as a source of injustice, Liang anticipated the pai-hua movement.\textsuperscript{393} Liang’s “New Prose Style (xin wen ti)”\textsuperscript{394} of classical Chinese prose was “simple and clear” and often “mixed with colloquial expressions, irregular verse, and foreign expression.”\textsuperscript{395} Liang was also a pioneer in advocating the novel as a vital medium to bring about social and political change.\textsuperscript{396}

Liang Shuming did not appear to have had a particularly strong attachment to classical Chinese, and must have agreed with the New Culturists in approving the use of vernacular Chinese. His \textit{Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies} consists of the speeches he made in 1920 and 1921. It was not only written in vernacular, but filled with commonly spoken expressions exclamations – decidedly not in the style of scholarly Confucian texts.

By contrast, maintaining classical Chinese was fundamental for Mei and his fellow Xueheng scholars. In his correspondence with Hu Shi, Mei equated vernacular Chinese with provincialism, colloquialism, and slang in English. He pointed out that vernacular Chinese was the language of the lowly people which he considered general, vague, and imprecise, therefore, unsuit for the literary use.\textsuperscript{397} In his judgment, vernacular Chinese could only be used in novels and dramas, but it should never be used for essays or historical writing.\textsuperscript{398} Unlike Liang, Mei did not link the literary use of classical Chinese with to mass illiteracy.\textsuperscript{399} While Mei’s four-prong proposal for literary revolution included a call for incorporating certain valuable vernacular words, especially terms from the sciences, he was careful to remind his readers that great caution should be used in adding these terms and that, of all his suggestions, bringing the vernacular into literary use was the least important.\textsuperscript{400}

While Liang Qichao and Hu Shi saw the use of vernacular Chinese as a way of facilitating the dissemination of ideas and improving the educational level of the common people, Mei saw it as a symptom of diminishing literary standards and as an example of striving for power and fame through appeasement and mobilization the masses.\textsuperscript{401} In essence, Mei was troubled by a conflict between quantity and quality.\textsuperscript{402} He was well aware of the value of modern vernacular Chinese to the common people, but he was also firmly convinced that the displacement of classical Chinese by the vernacular in literature would diminish literature’s qualitative excellence. Therefore, Mei believed that acceptance of vernacular Chinese would undermine scholarship which, he firmly believed, was essentially undemocratic. This was a

\textsuperscript{391} Huang, 4, 5.
\textsuperscript{392} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{393} Levenson, \textit{Liang Ch’i-ch’ao}, 48.
\textsuperscript{394} Theodore Huters, \textit{Bring the World Home: Appropriating the West in Late Qing and Early Republican China} (Honolulu: University of Hawaii’s Press, 2005), 81, 93.
\textsuperscript{395} Philip Huang, 4, 5.
\textsuperscript{396} Huters, 81.
\textsuperscript{397} Mei, \textit{Mei Guangdi}, 170.
\textsuperscript{398} Ibid., 181.
\textsuperscript{399} Rosen, 27.
\textsuperscript{400} Mei, \textit{Mei Guangdi}, 171.
\textsuperscript{401} Rosen, 25, 26.
\textsuperscript{402} Ibid., 26.
sacrifice that he refused to make. It is not surprising that one of the primary goals of the intellectuals involved in the Critical Review was to “create a modern Chinese prose style, capable of expressing new ideas and sentiments, yet retaining the traditional usage and inherent beauty of the language (original in English).” 403 In fact, the contributors to Xueheng all wrote in classical Chinese, which distinguished them not just from the New Culturists but also from Liang Qichao and Liang Shuming. On the battlefield of Chinese language, Liang Qichao and Liang Shuming were more allied with Hu Shi than with Mei Guangdi.

In keeping with their different attitudes toward the common people, Liang Qichao and Mei also held different views on history. Liang advocated a new approach to history, one that focused “not on courts or individual personalities, but the people.” 404 In this new approach, Liang demoted Confucius “from prophet to hero, just one of the species of good men in their day.” 405 In the New Citizen, he listed Confucius alongside Moses, Jesus, Columbus, Darwin, and Montesquieu, as a man of courage and perseverance. 406 By contrast, Mei’s world was a world of sages: the only figures he saw as worthy of sharing the stage with Confucius were Jesus Christ and the Buddha. For all his vaunted internationalism, Mei showed a decided prejudice for the Chinese tradition. In the 1940s, he wrote that “Confucius is the supreme sage whom we do not want to mention in the same breath with anyone.” 407 Mei’s unwillingness to downgrade Confucius from the status of a sage to a hero and his elevation of Babbitt to the status of “sage” reveals Mei’s enduringly hierarchical mindset.

While there is sufficient overlap in Mei and the Liangs’ emphasis on the value of China’s classical legacy to tempt one to group them as “conservatives,” especially vis-à-vis the mere radical reformers, we have also seen the many ways in which their agendas overlapped with those of the New Culturists. We should therefore observe Benjamin Schwartz’s caveats with regards to taking their cultural conservatism as a reliable indication of their political views. Schwartz cautioned that a “particular aspect of modern Chinese conservatism is that it is largely cultural conservatism and not basically a sociopolitical conservatism... [because] few members of the articulate intelligentsia are prepared to defend the current sociopolitical order as a whole.” 408 As Phillip Huang pointed out, the political views of cultural conservatives could be “very reactionary, very revolutionary, even extremely radical.” 409

Liang Qichao is recognized as a pioneer of Chinese liberalism. 410 He optimistically placed his hope in China’s new youth, trusting their rationality and their ability to learn. Beginning in 1917, he promoted education as the best way to create “the New Citizenry” and lay the foundations for a future liberal-democratic government. 411 Liang Shuming had similar high hopes for a democratic political system but he saw the means to creating it as a wholesale

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403 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 371.
404 Philip Huang, 6.
405 Levenson, Liang Ch’i-ch’ao, 121.
406 Ibid.
407 Hou, 67.
409 Chen, 3.
410 Philip Huang, 161.
411 Ibid., 4, 164.
importation of democratic models from the West. Still, he believed that the current dominance of western civilization would eventually give way to the greater power of China’s cultural heritage. Chinese civilization would be revitalized, but the two great achievements of the West, science and democracy, had to be embraced and accepted completely for them to be conserved. For all their cultural conservatism, the two Liangs were politically liberal and, in some ways, even radical.

By contrast, Mei’s conservative political views matched his cultural conservatism. In keeping with his belief in the undemocratic nature of scholarship, Mei advocated what one scholar has called “aristocratic democracy.”412 While Mei acknowledged that democracy was better than dictatorship or rule by hereditary aristocrats, he cautioned Chinese westernizers that the democratic system was prey to corruption.413 He listed three detrimental tendencies in democracy: first, since “one man’s opinion is just as good as another’s,” people in a democracy may suffer from excessive freedom and undermine traditional authority; second, in the pursuit of utilitarianism and efficiency, leadership would be taken by the mediocre and the prevailing popular desire would overrun the wisdom of the superior few; third, morality would tend to degrade due to an overemphasis on rights rather than responsibility.

Just as with culture, Mei perceived a conflict between quality and quantity in the political sphere. He feared that yielding to the will of the majority would diminish the quality of leadership. He pointed out that the essence of democracy was not to lower the standards set by the excellent few to cater to the demanding will of the many, but to enable people to overcome the barriers of class. Basically, Mei did not trust the ability of the common people, “the unreflective crowd,” to govern themselves well.414 Thus, while he acknowledged the crucial role of “active and enlightened citizenship” in creating and sustaining a healthy democracy, Mei mostly rested his hopes in “the intellectual class of China.”415 Compared to Liang Qichao and Liang Shuming, particularly in terms of politics, Mei Guangdi’s sympathies were significantly more elitist.

V. Facing the West

The views among the three “conservatives” regarding western modernity ranged from Liang Shuming’s generally positive yet still critical assessment to Mei Guangdi’s more decidedly negative. Traveling in the postwar Western Europe, Liang Qichao observed that “in European nations today, the tendency is to regard life solely in terms of material development, with the result that, no matter how plausible the contrivances, the malady only becomes worse.”416 He saw this obsession with material progress as the main symptom of the West’s ills.

Liang Shuming viewed capitalism as the source of western ills, considering it as the natural consequence of the West’s distinctive proclivities to reward self-interest and to value materialistic intellectual calculation.417 Yet despite his misgivings, he characterized western

413 Mei, “Min quan zhu yi,” 45-49.
414 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 369.
415 Mei, Letters, 199.
416 Levenson, Liang Ch‘i-ch‘ao, 207.
417 Alitto, 94.
culture as a “culture in which the spirit of will that demands forward progress produced the two great features of science and democracy.” By 1918, Liang had fully embraced science and democracy as valuable contributions to advanced civilization despite their social costs. Liang Qichao’s originally positive evaluation of western culture eventually turned quite negative by the final decade of his life. By contrast, Mei’s first-hand experience of life in the United States left him with an enduring impression of the West’s moral decadence and intellectual confusion that made him very wary of democracy’s tendency toward corruption and science’s tendency to overstep its areas of material expertise.

Although the two Liangs mentioned the ancient west in their works, their primary focus was on the modern. By contrast, Mei sharply distinguished between the ancient and modern West. While praising the West’s ancient cultural legacy, he condemned the moral confusion that pervaded the contemporary West, identifying modernity itself as the villain. In searching for elements of western culture that could be imported to revitalize China, Mei consistently looked both ancient western sources and the New Humanism of the modern America while the two Liangs drew inspiration exclusively from the West’s modern achievements in science and democracy and its institutions. The two scholarly associations that Liang Qichao created in 1920 after his return from Europe, the Society for Common Learning and the Society for Chinese Lectures, were both devoted to introducing China to modern western thought. The Society for Common Learning translated and summarized a wide range of western books in philosophy, economics, social theory, and psychology. Notably absent from the Society’s syllabus were the works of the ancient west. The Society for Chinese Lectures’ first guest speaker was John Dewey, Hu Shi’s much-admired professor. It is not hard to imagine that Mei must have been displeased that Irving Babbitt was never given a comparable opportunity to speak directly to Chinese students.

While Mei, like the two Liangs, acknowledged the modern West’s achievements in science and democracy, unlike them, he saw these two achievements as products of a long history that he traced to the teachings of the great sages of the ancient West. This impulse to look to the best of the distant past for the source of all that is culturally valuable arose in part from his submersion in the spirit of American Humanism, and in part from his earlier habits of mind, shaped as a classically trained Chinese scholar. The sages that filled Mei’s world were those whose teachings, transcending time and place, prepared the way for all those who followed. The ancient western “geniuses” who appeared most frequently in Mei’s writings included Aristotle, Socrates and Christ. In this “religion of great men (original in English),” the most revered moderns were the American humanists, especially Mei’s heroes Babbitt and Paul More.

Mei and the two Liangs also differed in their attitudes toward cultural imports. Liang Qichao was very liberal, believing in the freedom of thoughts and capability of the Chinese people. He pointed out that “the hegemony of thoughts is the symbol of the end of the civilization. Therefore, no matter whether we are convinced of those powerful thoughts of the

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418 Chen, 139.
419 Chen, 133.
420 Tang, 197.
421 Mei, “Chapter XV,” 120.
422 Lihong Liu, 202.
world or not, we should import them freely and then let the people choose." Mei’s conversion to American Humanism may have made him more cosmopolitan, but his near-partisan advocacy of Humanism made him suspicious of alternate views and led him to shut the door to cultural imports other than those that fit Humanism’s prescriptions. Mei’s cautious, discerning, and very selective approach to what aspects of western culture should be imported stands in sharp contrast to Liang Shuming’s which proposed that the Chinese should “completely accept Western culture while fundamentally reforming its mistakes” while “critically reapprais[ing] and bring[ing] forth anew China’s original attitude.” Liang believed that the Chinese were more than capable of avoiding the West’s mistakes even as they adopted, without reservation, western models of scientific thinking and democratic institutions. Mei did not.

The underlying question that every Chinese intellectual of the New Culture Era had to address was how to evaluate the relative status of Chinese and western civilizations. Generally, they used western achievements as their measure for assessing China’s current conditions. Clearly, if science and democracy were the sole criteria, China was relatively backward. But if other criteria were applied, the diagnosis became far more complex and nuanced. For example, by the time Liang Qichao reached the third phase of his intellectual career, he deemed Chinese civilization spiritually more progressed than the material West. In his view, “material life is merely a means for the maintenance of spiritual life; it should never be taken as substitute for the object which it serves.” This faith in the spiritual superiority of Chinese civilization became the critical characteristic of Liang’s later cultural syncretism. China still needed to pick fruits from the west to gain “the Confucian ideal of equilibrium,” but only condescendingly.

Even Liang Shuming, who candidly acknowledged Chinese civilization’s current inferiority, asserted its ultimate superiority. He argued that only Confucianism could teach people to live full lives in harmony with nature. According to Liang Shuming, only China’s Confucian civilization offered a path to inner satisfaction, harmony, and happiness, a path that was spiritually and morally far superior to the pervasive material greed of the West and India’s escapist renunciation of the world. While Confucianism could not, on its own, solve the problem of satisfying material human needs in the first stage of a civilization’s evolution, it did provide solutions for humanity’s future higher needs. In the fullness of time, Liang believed that the Chinese way of moderation and harmony would ultimately prevail. Liang Shuming’s analysis resembled Liang Qichao’s in its dualistic or even antagonistic framing of comparisons between current Chinese and western cultures. For him, “the west was the equivalent of mechanistic positivism, intellectualization, purposeful… action, selfishness, and ethical nihilism” while China represented “the equivalent of emotion, intuition, noncalculation, ethics, unselfishness, and absolute value.”

By contrast, of the three, only Mei believed in the fundamental equivalence of Chinese and western civilization on the grounds that “humanity is essentially alike in all places and all

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423 Qichao Liang, Liang Qichao Youji: Ou You Xin Ying Lu, Xin Da Lu You Ji (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 2006).
424 Alitto, 121.
425 Levenson, Liang Ch’i-ch’ao, 207.
426 Alitto, 97.
427 Zheng, 34; Alitto, 121.
428 Alitto, 100.
429 Alitto, 101.

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ages (original in English).” In his view, the simplistic division between the East and West was “more of an arbitrary invention of biased and superficial missionaries or of our own hawkers of ‘the new learning (original in English).” For Mei, while contrasts between China and the West “are undeniable, the points of similarity are more undeniable, especially if the two civilizations are judged historically and with reference to the great spiritual leaders that both have produced through the ages (original in English).” By viewing history in its totality, Mei looked for and found essential similarities between the East and West.

Liang Shuming easily fit Mei’s definition of a “hawker of ‘the new learning’” since Liang held the oppositional view that the Chinese and the western civilization were on different historical trajectories due to their different underlying “directions of the will.” As Liang pointed out, “The Chinese have not been traveling the same path as the Westerners. Because, if China were just traveling more slowly on the same path, then there would be a day when we would, walking slowly, catch up. If each [culture] is going along a separate road, or in separate directions, then no matter how long [China] travels, it will never reach the point the Westerners are at now.” In making this distinction, Liang put himself at odds with both Mei and the New Culturists.

Mei and Liang Qichao adopted moderate visions of cultural syncretism that set them apart from the more radical vision of the New Culturists. By pointing out the failures of the western modernity, Mei and Liang Qichao created some space for the theoretical possibility of developing a distinctly Chinese version of modernity. Liang saw syncretism as a way “to enrich our culture with Western culture and to enrich Western culture with our own, so that they might fuse into a new culture.” Philip Huang summarized Liang’s ideas thusly: “present-day Chinese must earnestly study and seek to understand Western thought. Only then would they know that their past learning was inadequate. At the same time, they must systematically study their own cultural heritage. They would then know that Western learning alone was also inadequate for solving Chinese problems. Thus would genuine interaction take place to result in the creation of something new.” In an article criticizing the New Culturists, Mei said more or less the same thing, pleading for patience and time: “Revising our traditional culture and absorbing other people’s culture first requires thorough study. This should involve the exercise of clear and correct judgment, the support of the most appropriate methodologies, and the collective efforts of hundreds of erudite scholars who are capable of synthesizing Eastern and Western learning, in order to teach and guide our fellow countrymen on this course of reform and develop it into a significant trend.”

By contrast, Liang Shuming flatly rejected the viability of cultural syncretism. Convinced that Chinese and Western cultures were profoundly and essentially different, he argued that cultural syncretism was infeasible since, unless one culture completely accepted the underlying will of another culture, it could not achieve effective cultural importation. He

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430 Mei, Letters, 193.
431 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 369.
432 Alitto, 87.
433 Ibid.
434 Philip Huang, 150.
436 Alitto, 85.
therefore insisted that China needed to adopt western culture “from the externals to the essentials.” Unless the Chinese studied ‘the path’ from which science and democracy emerged, they could not truly acquire either.

VI. Conclusion

The preceding contrasts and comparisons illustrate how these three intellectuals were a product of their age and how they faced the pressing issues of their time. They each addressed and responded distinctively to the question of how to evaluate Chinese tradition vis-à-vis the West; they each addressed and responded distinctively to the proposals of the New Culturists; and they each addressed and responded distinctively to the question of how much to trust the role of the common people in China’s revitalization. We found that what these three shared was their affirmation of certain elements of Chinese cultural legacy and disillusionment with some aspects of western civilization. Their sharp differences on other issues reminds us that grouping these thinkers all under the same label of “cultural conservatives,” while convenient, is not especially helpful in understanding the intellectual trends of their day.

Mei’s unique approach stands out from his fellow “conservatives” on a number of points. First, Mei firmly believed that there was an essential similarity in the cultures of the East and West. By contrast, other “conservatives” often emphasized the differences between the Chinese and western culture. In this regard, Mei’s views more closely resembled those of the New Culturists than those of his fellow cultural conservatives. Second, in asserting this cultural equivalence between East and West, he generally avoided the logical trap that the two Liangs fell into of having to judge Chinese civilization as either superior or inferior. Third, Mei’s affirmation of the value of the ancient West was unique. Most other Chinese cultural conservatives of his time focused solely on the modern west rather than its ancient contributions. Fourth, although all three were convinced of the timeless nature of certain values, Mei’s theories were far less influenced by the idea of progress than the others. Fifth, Mei also set himself apart from others with his stubborn insistence on the undemocratic nature of scholarship and in his elitist orientation. Finally, Mei quite consciously adopted the role of cultural bridge, bringing the tenets and perspectives of Humanism to the East while simultaneously introducing the teachings and perspectives of Confucianism, as he defined it, to Babbitt and the other American Humanists.

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437 Chen, 139.
438 Ibid.
Chapter Four: An Evaluation and the Conclusion

I. Mei Guangdi’s Historical Significance

This thesis traces how Mei Guangdi developed from a Confucian into a Humanist who, in seeking to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, was transformed by his encounter with the Humanism of Irving Babbitt from a reformer into a guardian of tradition. Before encountering Babbitt’s thinking, Mei condemned the historical practices of Confucianism, defined what he saw as original Confucianism, and advocated a revitalization of that original Confucianism as the best and only way to construct a new China. Through Humanism, Mei discovered commonalities between Chinese and Western cultural traditions and came to believe that the pressures of modernity threatened them both. Bringing American Humanism into the Chinese context, Mei proposed cultural syncretism as a sensible, middle-of-the-road solution for China’s ills. In his heated debate with Hu Shi, Mei defended the Confucian tradition by both propagating American Humanism in the Chinese context and adopting an anti-anti-traditionalist position towards the New Culturists.

Although Mei lost this debate with the New Culturists, his thoughts are invaluable in a number of ways. As the first Chinese disciple of Irving Babbitt, Mei was one of the first Chinese intellectuals to conceptualize Confucianism in humanistic terms when the fate of Confucianism was at its nadir in the New Culture era. Being concerned with the role of Confucianism in modern China, Mei was convinced that “a genuine Confucian revival would work to sustain the historical continuity and autonomy of Chinese national life.” That Mei went out of his way to recruit Chinese students to study with Irving Babbitt and then led the way in establishing Xueheng and its associated school, contributed significantly to the propagation of the concept of Confucian humanism in China. Chen Lai, writing nearly a hundred years later, echoes Mei’s insistence on the relevancy of Confucian humanism to the modern world. Cast in this light, Mei can and should be seen as a vanguard of modern Neo-Confucianism.

In addition, by establishing Xueheng, Mei contributed directly to the intellectual ferment that shaped the May Fourth Movement. Mei’s contemporary, Low Guanglai, commented that “the influence [that Xueheng] is exerting over the generality of the students and the masses is … not very great. But still its criticism of the excesses of the Vernacular Movement and the rampant vices and abuses of those who are fishing for fame supply a wholesome tonic and corrective.” C.T. Hsia affirms such views, pointing out that “in the long view, Mei Guangdi spoke the truth, especially with regard to the radical writers and intellectuals, who already powerful in 1922, were destined to shape China in their own image.” Mei did not disagree with the New Culturists on the necessity of constructing a new culture or with their willingness to borrow from the West; he did, however, hold a different vision for China’s future. Mei’s insistence on the value of China’s cultural legacy in the modern age, the middle way of cultural syncretism, and

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439 Mei, “Chapter XV,” 121.
440 Yunzhi Geng, “Hu Shi yu Mei Guangdi,” in Geng Yunzhi wenji (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2006), 432.
442 Feuerwerker, 150.
his preference for classical literature provided a much-needed counter-weight and alternative argument to the dominant discourse of the time. Mei’s open opposition to the dominant trends of his time not only illustrates the heterogeneity of the May Fourth Movement, but also offers current scholars some necessary perspective on the New Culture Movement.

Mei’s abiding concern with morality and his constant reminders of the possible ill consequences of radicalism and utilitarianism are still relevant to contemporary China. Current Chinese society has much more in common with the United States in which Babbitt and, for a while, Mei himself lived than the Chinese society to which Mei returned. Much of what Mei sought to prevent — cultural radicalism, the degradation of morality and ideals, and the disparity between classes in a materially dominated and commercially oriented society — have all come to pass. As the wheels of history roll forward, Mei’s caution appears far-sighted and remains highly relevant to contemporary Chinese society and, one might argue, inspirational.

II. Weakness and Inconsistency in the Thoughts of Mei

Despite the lasting merit of Mei’s critical thinking, certain aspects of his thinking are problematic. While Mei’s desire for China to achieve “a wise synthesis between the old and the new (original in English)” was both ambitious and idealistic, his published writings suffer from a certain vagueness. Only in his private correspondence with Hu Shi on his favorite subject of “the old,” did Mei expound in any detail on Confucius, Mencius, and Confucians like Yan Yuan and Li Gong whom he believed represented the authentic spirit of original Confucianism. In his published articles, however, Mei avoided articulating what specific elements of “the old” and “the new” he would subject to his syncretism. It was typical for him to write: “The good, the true, and the beautiful that have survived the test of all times (original in English)” and deserve to be preserved, without ever specifying what he considered good, true, or beautiful. This habit of making highly abstract and subjective assertions mars his argument for the trans-historical value of China’s cultural legacy. Even in his retrospective article, Humanism and Modern China, Mei rather vaguely describes the goal of the Xueheng school as one of trying to preserve “the best elements in the native tradition…[which] may be summed up as idealistic in philosophy, politics, and education, and classicist in literature… That is tantamount to saying that its position is Confucian (original in English).” As Chinese history has demonstrated, Confucianism has been subjected to multiple interpretations over time. In no published article, however, did Mei ever clearly identify what underlying presumptions guided his particular interpretation of the thinking of Confucius. It is all well and good to claim that he was restoring the original content of the sage’s teachings, but for over two thousand years, commentators on the classics claimed to be doing the same.

To get a clearer understanding of what elements of Chinese and western civilizations Mei intended to subject to cultural syncretism, it is necessary to establish an intellectual profile of what he considered “the best of the East and the West.” The following survey lists all the Chinese and western names that appear in Mei’s available writings. Chinese and western names are first divided into two categories with each category subdivided according to how he valued them: as positive, negative, or neutral. Hopefully, this list of the historical figures that Mei

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443 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 369.
444 Mei, Letters, 192.
445 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 371.
admired, supplemented by his comments on them, may reveal what guided his subjective identifications of what was “the best” in both in East and West and what was “the best” in “the old” and “the new.”

The following tables count the names that appear more than twice in Mei’s writings.\(^{446}\)

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<td>Cheng Brothers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zhu Xi</td>
<td>4</td>
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</table>

\(^{446}\) The complete list of texts on which this table is based is provided in the Appendix
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<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
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<td>Heinrich Heine</td>
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<td>William Wordsworth</td>
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<td>George Bernard Shaw</td>
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<td>Karl Marx</td>
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<td>Woodrow Wilson</td>
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<td>Jean-Jacques Rousseau</td>
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</table>

The frequency with which Chinese figures appear in Mei’s writings reveals his strong inclination towards Confucianism and the traditions of classical literature, which comports with the content of his correspondences to Hu Shi. The consistency of this pattern demonstrates that Mei’s ideas remained relatively stable over time. The frequency of the Chinese figures that Mei admired rank, in order: Confucius, Yan Yuan, Mencius, Li Gong, Zeng Guofan, Han Yu, Wang Anshi, and Ouyang Xiu. Given the preponderance of his emphasis on Confucius, this list lends credence to Mei’s claim that he was seeking to salvage original Confucianism from its later accretions. It is worth noting that, among the few articles Mei published, he devoted one solely to Confucius.

Mei’s admiration for Yan Yuan, Li Gong, and Zeng Guofan reveals Mei’s concern for the practice of Confucianism in daily life. There is a noteworthy relative absence of references in the list to Zhu Xi who, for Mei, represented the opposite spirit of Yan and Li. In his later writing,
while acknowledging Zhu as a significant figure, Mei criticized Zhu for being too metaphysical. For Mei, Zeng Guofan represented a model Confucian, one who had “the insight and broad-mindedness” to appreciate the West and who had been “the hero in the suppression of the Taiping Rebellion and the last of the great Confucian moralists and writers (original in English).”  

In Zeng Guofan, Mei found confirmation of his own values: a willingness to accept certain western cultural elements, an emphasis on morality, a desire to “convey the way” through literature, and recognition of the importance of a nation’s military strength. With regards to military strength, it is noteworthy that one of the two bills that Mei introduced in the People’s Council during his tenure was a proposal to build a Chinese navy.  

Mei’s admiration of Wang Anshi, Han Yu, and Ouyang Xiu confirms his identification as a reformer and champion of classical literature. Han Yu (786-824), an avid proponent of the Classical Prose Movement, is famous in Chinese history for having elucidated a line of descent for orthodox Confucians who considered literature as the primary vehicle for carrying the Confucian tradition.  

Mei called Han “the great reviver of Confucianism and classical Chinese literature (original in English)” and “the Dryden or Boileau of China (original in English).” Another forbearer whom Mei admired was Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072) who contributed to the literary movement that advocated the adoption of ancient-style prose and the rejection of ornamental prose with the goal of regenerating Confucian morality. Mei praised Ouyang Xiu for his call for the rehabilitation of Han Yu, and he found inspiration in actions of both. It is notable that the scholars Mei admired championed classical literature and its role in preserving an original Confucian tradition rather than those associated with other philosophical and literary schools.

The list of the westerners that Mei admired further confirms his self-described identity as a humanist and a man of literature. Chief among his western heroes are, in order: Irving Babbitt, Matthew Arnold, Paul More, Goethe, Shakespeare, Socrates, Emerson, and Homer. As much as he valued the cultural legacy of the West’s ancient sages, given that Mei’s syncretistic project was aimed at revitalizing modern China, it is unsurprising that he gives pride of place to his modern American Humanist masters, Babbitt and More. Matthew Arnold, whom Babbitt deemed “a positive and critical humanist,” was important to Mei in providing useful and authoritative arguments for criticizing the New Culture Movement as a movement of philistines. Following Babbitt’s distinction between Socrates and Rousseau as the difference between “a sage and a sophist,” Mei drew upon Socrates’s critique of a famous sophist when he identified the New Culturists as “sophists.” He departed from Babbitt’s emphasis on the humanistic side of Goethe.

447 Mei, Letters, 229.
449 Hou, 74.
450 Mei, “Chapter XV,” 126.
451 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 371.
454 Babbitt, Literature, 23.
and Shakespeare and the imitative side of Homer.\textsuperscript{455} In his references to Goethe, Shakespeare, Emerson, and Homer, Mei, as a professor of western literature, mainly emphasized the enduring value of their literary works.

Some of the vagueness in Mei’s thinking may have been inherited from – or reinforced by – his conversion to American Humanism. David Hoeveler, the author of \textit{The New Humanism}, argued that the American humanists found reason alone inadequate to deal with the complexities of life and therefore needed to appeal to imagination as its necessary complement. For Humanists, Hoeveler observed: “The vision of the higher life, the unity of things, the permanent in man’s character, was illusory. This meant, not ‘false,’ or ‘deceptive,’ but unclear—a vague sense or apprehension that cannot be rendered in rational or intellectual terms and cannot be precisely described.”\textsuperscript{456} “Their sense of permanence was “intentionally vague in itself, but a central starting point.”\textsuperscript{457} Imagination also played an important role in Mei’s sense of permanence. He pointed out that science and rationalism should not wage war against Chinese “national myths and beliefs” because they not only “have inspired some of our best art and literature,” but also “long sustained our yearnings and imagination for the infinite and eternal (original in English).”\textsuperscript{458} Mei embraced the Humanist proclivity to seek the ideal, and so, while he may not have intended to be unclear in his writing, his vagueness rendered his thinking as expressions of ideals, an aspirational rather than a practical guide.

Although Mei attempted to bridge the gap between the old and the new and the chasm between East and West with a middle way approach, his location of the proper center is highly subjective; that is, it is based on his own personal moral and aesthetic sensibilities. Mei saw the salvation of modern China mainly as a reformation and revitalization of its culture and literature. In his writings, he paid little attention to China’s political, economic, and social problems. In his speech, \textit{The Importance of Classical Chinese Literature}, made in 1933, Mei continued to maintain his belief in saving China through literature. He said: “To save China, the sole means should start from the study of the classical literature. It will enhance your wisdom, supply you with happiness, expand your feeling, and revive China to an utmost true, kind and beautiful state.”\textsuperscript{459} By focusing on morality and humanist virtues and the importance of literature at the expense of political and economic ideas, Mei exposed himself to the criticisms of his more practically reform-minded intellectual peers. Mei’s concerns remained idealist, not materialist.

His approach is also subjective in locating historical agency with the elite. Refusing to attribute to the vast majority of people a role in history making, Mei’s conscious emphasis on the glory of the sages and his insistence on the rule of “the few” appears to be terribly off any middle path. Although he was willing to incorporate other categories of intellectuals to share the leadership in the society, Mei essentially supported the elevation of the intellectual class as a whole.\textsuperscript{460}

Mei’s deviations from the middle way are potentially a result of both Mei’s Confucian identity and Mei’s application of American Humanism into the Chinese context. Commenting on

\begin{itemize}
\item Babbitt, \textit{Literature}, 60; \textit{Spanish Character, and Other Essays} (Houghton, Mifflin company, 1940), 45.
\item Hoeveler, 38.
\item Ibid.
\item Mei, \textit{Letters}, 191.
\item Mei, “Zhongguo,” 219.
\item Ibid., 213.
\end{itemize}
the value judgment of the traditionalists, Levenson points out that “for the traditional Chinese values which a modern could reaffirm would be those which conformed to his own standards, i.e. those to which he would subscribe even if he knew nothing of tradition.”⁴⁶¹ In Mei’s case, it is Mei’s own subjective orientation towards the original Confucianism, his elitist position, and his affection towards classical Chinese literature resulted in his faith in the power of literature, his insistence on importance of the intellectuals, and his choice of American Humanism among other western intellectual trends.

However, Xueheng’s importation of American Humanism was problematic.⁴⁶² After all, the conditions in the United States that give birth to American Humanism differed greatly from those found in contemporary China. The United States was an industrialized, urbanized society while China was barely beginning to be industrialized and the great mass of its people lived in the countryside. Even as Babbitt lamented the negative consequences of modernization on society, China faced an urgent and generally acknowledged need to modernize its economic and political institutions. Mei’s dismissal of the importance of material advancement as “pointless and irrelevant” relative to spiritual and cultural advancement strikes us, just as it did his critics, as oblivious to China’s material needs. His decidedly cultural solutions to the political, cultural, and economic problems of early Republican China were inadequate, the musings of a scholar rather than those of a practical reformer.

The air of vagueness and the apparent subjectivity in Mei’s thinking is made even more problematic by his inconsistencies. In most of his writings, Mei simultaneously pointed to the universally shared humanist traditions of China and the West whenever arguing for cultural importation while, at the same time, emphasizing “the differences in history and national character between the East and the West” when cautioning against too closely imitating western political systems and uncritically adopting western values in the areas of education, philosophy, literature and the fine arts.⁴⁶³ He asked if “those various isms popular in our country (imported from the West) are really suited for the contemporary Chinese society?”⁴⁶⁴ He argued that “The births of various western isms all resulted from their particular social systems.”⁴⁶⁵ In making such arguments, Mei seemed to be unconsciously coming dangerously close to those very “hawkers of the ‘New Learning’” that he criticized for persistently setting forth “the contrasts …between the Eastern and Western civilizations (original in English).”⁴⁶⁶ Mei’s inconsistencies most likely derive from his conflicted national pride. On the one hand, Mei turned to the universal validity of humanism in order to buttress his mission of revitalizing Confucianism in China while incorporating it into the greater universal humanist mission. On the other hand, Mei’s nationalism pushed him to emphasize the particularity of Chinese culture, a national cultural identity that Mei feared the Chinese could lose by wholesale westernizing of Chinese society. The need to maintain a careful balance between the universal and the particular accounts, in great part, for Mei’s insistence that only Confucian scholars should be entrusted with the task of Chinese modernization. Only those intellectuals steeped in

⁴⁶¹ Levenson, Confucian China, 110.
⁴⁶² Shiqu Zheng, Zai ouhua yu guocui zhijian (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 2001), 147.
⁴⁶⁴ Mei, “Zijue.”
⁴⁶⁵ ibid.
⁴⁶⁶ Mei, Letters, 193.
teachings of Confucius “would not make themselves denationalized hybrids, or at best second-rate Europeans and Americans, but remain essentially Chinese (italic mine; original in English).” As always, he saw classical Chinese literature as the embodiment of the “true nationality (original in English)” of the Chinese. Even as he argued for the cultural equivalence of eastern and western civilization, his elevation of Confucius as the greatest of all sages illustrates his profound attachment to the distinctively valuable “history” of China. It is significant, then, that the ultimate praise he could bestow on his much-admired professor, Irving Babbitt, was to call him a “new sage” who deserved the honor of membership in the Temple of Confucius along with Han Yu and Ouyang Xiu. In short, Mei seems to have lived in what Levenson called “a continuing conflict between universal and particular.”

Mei’s intellectual campaign against the New Culturists focused on attacking and undermining dominant trends in New Culturist thinking rather than systematically establishing his humanist views. Although, in retrospect, Mei characterized the work of Xueheng as Confucian, even he admits that, at the height of their controversy with the New Culturists, he and the other Xueheng scholars did “not so much as declare for a Confucian movement (original in English).” They were less concerned with explicitly defending Confucianism than in responding to their intellectual rivals. It was Liang Shuming, not Mei Guangdi, who openly defended Confucianism in his popular book, *Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies* published in 1921. The Neo-Confucianist, Feng Yulan recorded its significance: “Mr. Liang’s book is the first conscious and serious attempt to grasp the idea and to show the excellences and the defects of the old Chinese culture in comparison with the European and the Indian.” It is not surprising then that Mei is mostly remembered as Hu Shi’s intellectual adversary rather than for his promulgation of Confucian humanism.

In keeping with his role as an intellectual partisan, name-calling was an integral part of Mei’s writing style. Rosen points out that Mei’s tart characterizations of the New Culturists as “not thinkers but sophists, not creative writers but imitators, not scholars but seekers after political success, not educators but politicians” are possibly “the most famous, if not the most quoted, [passages] of the several volumes of Hsueh-heng.” Mei’s polemical style diverts attention from the substance of Mei’s argument against the New Culturists. Mei’s attacks were so intense that some scholars accused Mei of violating Xueheng’s own principle of self-restraint.

### III. Conclusion

This essay set out to examine the essence of the cultural thinking of Mei Guangdi while using his example as a fruitful way to analyze the interaction of Chinese traditionalism and American Humanism, and to explore the complexity of intellectual trends within the New Culture Movement of the early twentieth century. It argued that Mei Guangdi attempted to face the challenge of his day with a middle way approach, attempting to modernize China in a way

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467 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 373.
470 Mei, “Humanism and Modern China,” 371.
472 Rosen, 36.
that is both traditional and modern, both universal and distinctively Chinese, and both western and native. It found that the combination of Mei’s intellectual disposition and the impact of American humanism worked together to convince Mei of the enduring value of Confucian humanism in the modern world.

In American Humanism, Mei found not only an intellectual resonance that reinforced his preexisting intellectual propensities, but also found inspiration for advocating the universality of humanism. His exposure to American Humanism enabled Mei to discover a new middle way – a vision of humanist cultural syncretism that could guide China’s modernization while at the same time celebrate the historical continuity of “the best of ‘the old’” in the entire world’s adjustment to the forces of modernity. Mei’s humanist perspective goes far in explaining why Mei consciously chose to find the ultimate hope for China’s future in a reinvigoration of China’s cultural legacy rather than what he perceived as the radical and wholesale importation of western concepts and models being promoted by reformers like Hu Shi. Humanism also provided Mei with the authoritative, rational and theoretical support to sustain his criticism of the New Culturists as deniers of the validity of the humanist tradition itself.

In comparing and contrasting Mei’s views with those of Liang Qichao and Liang Shuming, this thesis also set out to illustrate the heterogeneity of views within the so-called “conservative” camp. That analysis revealed that while they shared many key concerns, their opinions on those issues varied greatly. Insofar as this thesis illuminated a disparity of thought within a group commonly seen as in agreement, this thesis represents a further effort to decenter the discourse of the May Fourth Movement and expose that Movement’s fascinating complexity.

In the eyes of the historian Levenson, conservative intellectuals like Mei were like modern Don Quixotes who devoted themselves to a grand and heroic cause that proved both doomed and futile. As contemporary Chinese society sinks ever deeper into a money-oriented kaleidoscopic world, one wonders if the old Chinese wisdom that Mei Guangdi sought so valiantly to preserve might not still offer some of the same balance and guidance to today’s modernizers that Mei once tried to provide for his contemporaries.
Appendix


“The Task of Our Generation.” *The Chinese Students’ Monthly* 12, no. 3 (January 1917).


“Zijue yu mangchong” 自觉与盲从. *Minxin zhoubao* 1 no. 7 (1920).


“Ping tichang xinwenhua zhe” 评提倡新文化者. *Xueheng* 1 (January 1922).


“Ping jinren tichang xueshu zhi fangfa” 评今人提倡学术之方法. *Xueheng* 2 (February 1922).


“Xianjin xiyang renwen zhuyi” 现今西洋人文主义. *Xueheng* 8 (August 1922).

“An nuo de zhi wenhua lun” 安诺德之文化论. *Xueheng* 14 (February 1923).

“Is the West Awakening?” *The Nation* 122, no. 3172 (April 21, 1926): 446-448.

“Kongzi zhi fengdu” 孔子之风度. *Guo feng* 3 (September 1932).


“Ying mei hezuo zhi binanxing” 英美合作之必然性. *Guo ming* 6 (March 1939).

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Mei, Guangdi and Zhao, Yuanren, “Yanjianghui jishi.” Kexue 3, no. 1 (January 1917), 82-83.


Yang, Yang. “Zhongguo xiandandai yujing zhong de Bai Bide.”


