

“THE TRUE MEANING OF LIFE”
By Chen Duxiu

Introduction

Beginning around 1917, Chinese intellectuals began to engage each other in serious discussion and debate on culture, history, philosophy, and related subjects — all with an eye to the bigger problem of China’s weakness and the possible solutions to that problem. This period of intellectual debate, labeled the May Fourth Movement, lasted to around 1921.

Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) was one of the leading intellectuals of the May Fourth movement. Dean of Peking University in 1916, and, in 1921, co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party, Chen also edited and published the popular *New Youth* magazine.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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What is the ultimate purpose of life? What should it be, after all? ... In my opinion, what the Buddha said is vague. ... The teachings of Christianity, especially, are fabrications out of nothing and cannot be proved. ... The rectification of the heart, cultivation of the person, family harmony, ordering of the state, and world peace that Confucius and Mencius talked about are but some activities and enterprises in life and cannot cover the total meaning of life. ...

Because we Chinese have accepted the teachings of [contentment and laissez-faire] of Laozi and Zhuangzi, we have to that extent been backward. ...

1. With reference to human existence, the individual’s birth and death are transitory, but society really exists.

...

4. Society is the collective life of individuals. If society is dissolved, there will be no memory or consciousness of the continuation of the individual after he dies. Therefore social organization and order should be respected.

...

6. All religions, laws, moral and political systems are but necessary means to preserve social order. They are not the individual’s original purpose of enjoyment in life and can be changed in accordance with the circumstances of the time.

...

9. To enjoy happiness, do not fear suffering. Personal suffering at the moment sometimes contributes to personal happiness in the future. For example, the blood shed in righteous wars often wipes out the bad spots of a nation or mankind. Severe epidemics often hasten the development of science.

Questions:

1. Analyze Chen Duxiu’s attitude toward Confucian philosophy as revealed in these passages. To what extent does he accept, follow, or reject the Confucian philosophical/moral heritage?
2. Compare Chen’s attitude toward the Chinese cultural heritage with that of Liang Shuming.
3. Analyze Chen’s attitude toward Buddhism and Daoism. To what extent does he accept or reject Buddhist and/or Daoist philosophy? To what extent is he influenced by these philosophies?

Longer Selection

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What is the ultimate purpose in life? What should it be, after all? ... From ancient times not a few people have offered explanations. ... In my opinion, what the Buddha said is vague. Although the individual’s birth and death are illusory, can we say that humanity as a whole is not really existent? ... The teachings of Christianity, especially, are fabrications out of nothing and cannot be proved. If God can create the human race, who created Him? Since God’s existence or nonexistence cannot be proved, the Christian philosophy of life cannot be completely believed in. The rectification of the heart, cultivation of the person, family harmony, ordering of the state, and world peace that Confucius and Mencius talked about are but some activities and enterprises in life and cannot cover the total meaning of life. If we are totally to sacrifice ourselves to benefit others, then we exist for others and not for ourselves. This is definitely not the fundamental reason for man’s existence. The idea [of altruism] of Mozi is also

not free from one-sidedness. The doctrines of Yang Zhu [fourth century BCE?] and Nietzsche fully reveal the true nature of life, and yet if we follow them to their extremes, how can this complex, organized, and civilized society continue? ...

Because we Chinese have accepted the teachings [of contentment and laissez-faire] of Laozi and Zhuangzi, we have to that extent been backward. Scientists say that there is no soul after a man's death. ... It is difficult to refute these words. But although we as individuals will inevitably die, it is not easy for the whole race or humanity to die off. The civilization created by the race or humanity will remain. It is recorded in history and will be transmitted to later generations. Is this not the consciousness or memory of our continuation after death? From the above, the meaning of life as seen by the modern man can be readily understood. Let me state it briefly as follows:

1. With reference to human existence, the individual's birth and death are transitory, but society really exists.
2. The civilization and happiness of society are created by individuals and should be enjoyed by individuals.
3. Society is an organization of individuals — there can be no society without individuals. ... The will and the happiness of the individual should be respected.
4. Society is the collective life of individuals. If society is dissolved, there will be no memory or consciousness of the continuation of the individual after he dies. Therefore social organization and order should be respected.
5. To carry out one's will and to satisfy his desires (everything from food and sex to moral reputation is “desire”) are the basic reasons for the individual's existence. These goals never change. (Here we can say that Heaven does not change and the Way does not change either.)
6. All religions, laws, moral and political systems are but necessary means to preserve social order. They are not the individual's original purpose of enjoyment in life and can be changed in accordance with the circumstances of the time.
7. People's happiness in life is the result of their own effort and is neither the gift of God nor a spontaneous natural product. If it were the gift of God, how is it that He was so generous with people today and so stingy with people in the past? If it is a spontaneous, natural product, why is it that the happiness of the various peoples in the world is not uniform?
8. The individual in society is comparable to the cell in the body. Its birth and death are transitory. New ones replace the old. This is as it should be and need not be feared at all.
9. To enjoy happiness, do not fear suffering. Personal suffering at the moment sometimes contributes to personal happiness in the future. For example, the blood shed in righteous wars often wipes out the bad spots of a nation or mankind. Severe epidemics often hasten the development of science.

In a word, what is the ultimate purpose in life? What should it be, after all? I dare say:

Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on

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During his lifetime, an individual should devote his efforts to create happiness and to enjoy it, and also to keep it in store in society so that individuals of the future may also enjoy it, one generation doing the same for the next and so on unto infinity.