

**“CHINESE CIVILIZATION VIS-À-VIS EASTERN AND WESTERN
PHILOSOPHIES”**

By Liang Shuming

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.

Liang Shuming (1893-1988) was a scholar, philosopher, professor, and author living in Beijing. He was an active participant in the debates on culture during the May Fourth period. In the following passage, he discusses Western, Indian, and Chinese cultures.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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“Chinese Civilization vis-à-vis Eastern and Western Philosophies”

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

...

Let us compare Western culture with Chinese culture. First, there is the conquest of nature on the material side of Western culture — this China has none of. Second, there is the scientific method on the intellectual side of Western culture — this also China has none of. And third, there is democracy on the social side of Western culture — this, too, China has none of. ... This shows negatively that the way of Chinese culture is not that of the West ...

...

... The problems discussed in the ancient West and ancient India have in fact not existed in China. While the problems of the West and India are not really identical, they are the same insofar as the search for the reality of the universe is concerned. ... Have you heard of Chinese

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philosophers debating monism, dualism, or pluralism, or idealism and materialism? The Chinese do not need to discuss such static problems of tranquil reality. ...

...

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

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

Questions:

1. What stereotypes is Liang Shuming using in his comparative analysis of Chinese, Indian, and Western civilizations? How do these stereotypes compare to those that you would expect from your point of view?
2. Compare Liang's attitude toward Western and Chinese civilizations with other May Fourth intellectuals, such as Hu Shi and Liang Qichao. Do they differ in their interpretations and assessments of the value of Western and Chinese civilizations?
3. What might account for Liang's negative assessment and rejection of Indian civilization?

Longer Selection

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

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

The first point of the Confucian philosophy of life arising out of this type of Chinese metaphysics is that life is right and good. Basically, this metaphysics speaks in terms of “the life of the universe.” Hence it is said that “change means reproduction and reproduction.”¹ Confucius said many things to glorify life, like “The great characteristic of Heaven and earth is to give life,”² and “Does Heaven speak? All the four seasons pursue their course and all things are continually being produced.” ...³ Human life is the reality of a great current. It naturally tends toward the most suitable and the most satisfactory. It responds to things as they come. This is change. It spontaneously arrives at centrality, harmony, and synthesis. Hence its response is always right. This is the reason why the Confucian school said, “What Heaven has conferred is what we call human nature. To fulfill the law of human nature is what we call the Way.”⁴ As long as one fulfills his nature, it will be all right. This is why it is said that it can be understood and put into practice even by men and women of the simplest intelligence. This

¹ *Changes*, Xizi 1, ch. 5; Legge, *Yi King*, p. 356.

² *Ibid.* 2, ch. 1; Legge, *Yi King*, p. 381.

³ *Analects* 17:19.

⁴ *Mean* ch. 1.

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knowledge and ability are what Mencius called the knowledge possessed by man without deliberation and the ability possessed by him without having been acquired by learning.⁵

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⁵ *Mencius* 7a:15.