

“ ESSENTIALS OF THE NEW LIFE MOVEMENT ” (SPEECH , 1934)
By Chiang Kai-shek

Introduction

In 1934 the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi, 1887-1975) called for China to carry out a “New Life Movement.” At the time, Chiang was leader of the Republic of China, with his government in Nanjing. Chiang’s government, seriously underfunded, had only nominal control over vast areas of the country, which were actually run by warlords who had allied with Chiang and acknowledged the authority of his ROC government in theory while retaining substantial power (backed by their own armies) in practice. Chiang’s government was notoriously corrupt and not averse to cooperating with organized crime on projects such as opium “suppression” (i.e., monopoly), kidnapping, and assassination of political enemies. Japan had taken over northeastern China, or Manchuria, in 1932-1933 and renamed it “Manchukuo.” Within China, intellectuals had debated (and attacked) traditional Chinese values in the New Culture or May Fourth Movement, and the Communist Party, although driven underground in the cities, was active in the countryside.

It was in this context that Chiang Kai-shek delivered this speech in September 1934 in the city of Nanchang, thus inaugurating the New Life Movement.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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“Essentials of the New Life Movement” (Speech, 1934)
By Chiang Kai-shek

The New Life Movement aims at the promotion of a regular life guided by the four virtues, namely, *li* [ritual/decorum], *yi* [rightness or duty], *lian* [integrity or honesty], and *chi* [sense of shame]. Those virtues must be applied to ordinary life in the matter of food, clothing, shelter, and action. The four virtues are the essential principles for the promotion of morality. They form the major rules for dealing with men and human affairs, for cultivating oneself, and for adjustment to one’s surroundings. Whoever violates these rules is bound to fail, and a nation that neglects them will not survive.

...

By the observance of these virtues, it is hoped that rudeness and vulgarity will be got rid of and that the life of our people will conform to the standard of art. ...

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By the observance of these virtues, it is hoped that beggary and robbery will be eliminated and that the life of our people will be productive. The poverty of China is primarily caused by the fact that there are too many consumers and too few producers. Those who consume without producing usually live as parasites or as robbers. They behave thus because they are ignorant of the four virtues. ...

By observance of these virtues, it is hoped that social disorder and individual weakness will be remedied and that people will become more military-minded. If a country cannot defend itself, it has every chance of losing its existence. ... Therefore our people must have military training. As a preliminary, we must acquire the habits of orderliness, cleanliness, simplicity, frugality, promptness, and exactness. We must preserve order, emphasize organization, responsibility and discipline, and be ready to die for the country at any moment.

Questions:

1. What philosophical traditions does Chiang Kai-shek draw on in this speech? Do you think that his use of those philosophical traditions is true to the intent of the philosophers themselves?
2. Reading these passages, what impression do you get of the relationship of the individual to the state?
3. In making the recommendations in the passages above, Chiang is clearly implying that something is wrong with China and the Chinese people — something that his recommendations is intended to fix. What flaws or weaknesses in the Chinese people do Chiang's suggestions imply?
4. How does Chiang's understanding of the sources of Chinese weakness (as implied in these comments) compare to the understanding of other Chinese intellectuals during earlier periods — Liang Qichao, for example, or Feng Guifen?

Longer Selection

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The Object of the New Life Movement

Why is a New Life Needed?

The general psychology of our people today can be described as spiritless. What manifests itself in behavior is this: lack of discrimination between good and evil, between what is public and what is private, and between what is primary and what is secondary. Because there is no discrimination between good and evil, right and wrong are confused; because there is no

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discrimination between public and private, improper taking and giving [of public funds] occur; and because there is no distinction between primary and secondary, first and last are not placed in the proper order. As a result, officials tend to be dishonest and avaricious, the masses are undisciplined and calloused, youth become degraded and intemperate, adults are corrupt and ignorant, the rich become extravagant and luxurious, and the poor become mean and disorderly. Naturally it has resulted in disorganization of the social order and national life, and we are in no position either to prevent or to remedy natural calamities, disasters caused from within, or invasions from without. The individual, society, and the whole country are now suffering. ... In order to develop the life of our nation, protect the existence of our society, and improve the livelihood of our people, it is absolutely necessary to wipe out these unwholesome conditions and to start to lead a new and rational life.

The Content of the New Life Movement

1. *The Principles of the New Life Movement*

The New Life Movement aims at the promotion of a regular life guided by the four virtues, namely, *li* [ritual/decorum], *yi* [rightness or duty], *lian* [integrity or honesty], and *chi* [sense of shame]. Those virtues must be applied to ordinary life in the matter of food, clothing, shelter, and action. The four virtues are the essential principles for the promotion of morality. They form the major rules for dealing with men and human affairs, for cultivating oneself, and for adjustment to one's surroundings. Whoever violates these rules is bound to fail, and a nation that neglects them will not survive.

There are two kinds of skeptics:

First, some hold that the four virtues are merely rules of good conduct. No matter how good they may be, they are not sufficient to save a nation whose knowledge and technique are inferior to others.

Those who hold this view do not seem to understand the distinction between matters of primary and secondary importance. People need knowledge and technique because they want to do good. Otherwise, knowledge and technique can only be instruments of dishonorable deeds. *Li*, *yi*, *lian*, and *chi* are the principal rules alike for the community, the group, or the entire nation. Those who do not observe these rules will probably utilize their knowledge and ability to the detriment of society and ultimately to their own disadvantage. Therefore, these virtues not only can save the nation but also can rebuild the nation.

Second, there is another group of people who argue that these virtues are merely formal refinements that are useless in dealing with hunger and cold. ... [Yet] when these virtues prevail, even if food and clothing are insufficient, they can be produced by human labor; or, if the granary is empty, it can be filled through human effort. On the other hand, when these virtues are not observed, if food and clothing are insufficient, they will not be made sufficient by fighting and robbing; or, if the granary is empty, it will not be filled by stealing and begging.

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The four virtues, which rectify the misconduct of men, are the proper methods of achieving abundance. Without them, there will be fighting, robbing, stealing, and begging among men. ...

2. *The Meaning of Li, Yi, Lian, and Chi*

Although *li*, *yi*, *lian*, and *chi* have always been regarded as the foundations of the nation, yet the changing times and circumstances may require that these principles be given a new interpretation. As applied to our life today, they may be interpreted as follows:

Li means "regulated attitude."

Yi means "right conduct."

Lian means "clear discrimination."

Chi means "real self-consciousness."

The word *li* (decorum) means *li* (principle). It becomes natural law when applied to nature; it becomes a rule when applied to social affairs; and it signifies discipline when used in reference to national affairs. A man's conduct is considered regular if it conforms with the above law, rule, and discipline. When one conducts oneself in accordance with the regular manner, one is said to have the regulated attitude.

The word *yi* means "proper." Any conduct that is in accordance with *li* — i.e., natural law, social rule, and national discipline — is considered proper. To act improperly, or to refrain from acting when one knows it is proper to act, cannot be called *yi*.

The word *lian* means "clear." It denotes distinction between right and wrong. What agrees with *li* and *yi* is right, and what does not agree is wrong. To take what we recognize as right and to forgo what we recognize as wrong constitute clear discrimination.

The word *chi* means "consciousness." When one is conscious of the fact that his own actions are not in accordance with *li*, *yi*, *lian*, and *chi*, one feels ashamed.

From the above explanations, it is clear that *chi* governs the motive of action, that *lian* gives the guidance for it, that *yi* relates to the carrying out of an action, and that *li* regulates its outward form. The four are interrelated. They are dependent upon each other in the perfecting of virtue.

Conclusion

In short, the main object of the New Life Movement is to substitute a rational life for the irrational, and to achieve this we must observe *li*, *yi*, *lian*, and *chi* in our daily life.

1. By the observance of these virtues, it is hoped that rudeness and vulgarity will be got rid of and that the life of our people will conform to the standard of art. By art we are not referring to the special enjoyment of the gentry. We mean the cultural standard of all the people, irrespective of sex, age, wealth, and class. It is the boundary line between civilized life and barbarism. It is the only way by which one can achieve the purpose of man, for only by artistically controlling oneself and dealing with others can one fulfill the duty of mutual

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assistance. ... A lack of artistic training is the cause of suspicion, jealousy, hatred, and strife that are prevalent in our society today. ... To investigate things so as to extend our knowledge, to distinguish between the fundamental and the secondary, to seek the invention of instruments, to excel in our techniques — these are the essentials of an artistic life, the practice of which will enable us to wipe out the defects of vulgarity, confusion, crudity, and baseness.

2. By the observance of these virtues, it is hoped that beggary and robbery will be eliminated and that the life of our people will be productive. The poverty of China is primarily caused by the fact that there are too many consumers and too few producers. Those who consume without producing usually live as parasites or as robbers. They behave thus because they are ignorant of the four virtues. To remedy this we must make them produce more and spend less. They must understand that luxury is improper and that living as a parasite is a shame.

3. By the observance of these virtues, it is hoped that social disorder and individual weakness will be remedied and that people will become more military-minded. If a country cannot defend itself, it has every chance of losing its existence. ... Therefore our people must have military training. As a preliminary, we must acquire the habits of orderliness, cleanliness, simplicity, frugality, promptness, and exactness. We must preserve order, emphasize organization, responsibility, and discipline, and be ready to die for the country at any moment.