

[Leigh Jenco](#)

## Culture as history: envisioning change across and beyond "eastern" and "western" civilizations in the May Fourth era

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**Culture as History:**

**Envisioning Change Across and Beyond “Eastern” and “Western” Civilizations in the  
May Fourth Era**

Leigh Jenco

London School of Economics and Political Science, Department of Government

Houghton Street

London WC2A 2AE United Kingdom

[leigh.jenco@gmail.com](mailto:leigh.jenco@gmail.com)

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## **Culture as History:**

### **Envisioning Change Across and Beyond “Eastern” and “Western” Civilizations in the May Fourth Era**

This paper explores the new imaginaries of change available to reformers during the May Fourth movement by examining an often-overlooked but influential debate about the value of “Eastern” and “Western” civilizations. In this debate, which arose amid the collapse of the first Chinese republic in the early nineteen-teens, participants elaborated sometimes fanciful civilizational histories to locate China’s position within increasingly multicultural dimensions of space and time. Their trans-historical, trans-cultural comparisons eventually gave rise to the normative East-West binarism that by the early 1920s had become “commonplace” in Chinese political discourse.<sup>1</sup> The civilization debate marked several distinctive innovations in Chinese discourse about the means and purposes of Western learning, particularly the ways in which certain forms of historical understanding determined the significance and identity of cultural difference, the possibility of cultural transformation, and the role of Western modernity in China’s future. Typically, scholars tend to characterize May Fourth attitudes to history as tied to an understanding of modernity “defined in a context of unilinear time” seen to be universal.<sup>2</sup> The broader conversation over Eastern and Western

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<sup>1</sup> Leo Ou-fan Lee, “Incomplete Modernity: Rethinking the May Fourth Project,” in *The Appropriation of Cultural Capital: China’s May Fourth Project*, ed. Milena Doleželová-Velingerová and Oldrich Kral (Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 41.

<sup>2</sup> Leo Ou-fan Lee, “In Search of Modernity: Some Reflections on a New Mode of Consciousness in Twentieth Century Chinese History and Literature,” in *Ideas Across Cultures: Essays on Chinese Thought in Honor of Benjamin I. Schwartz*, ed. Paul A. Cohen and Merle Goldman (Harvard University Asia Center, 1990), 111; Joseph R. Levenson,

civilizations shows, however, that more subtle and diverse understandings of China's future are also at stake, and these contrast in revealing ways to earlier views of historical unfolding. Participants recognized, as Li Changzhi (李長之 1911-1978) were to put it later, that “culture is a thing with a history.”<sup>3</sup> This meant that even radical Westernizers could not follow late-Qing reformers in assuming that China's difference from Western nations would eventually be resolved through a universal process of historical evolution. Their conversations wrestled with a growing recognition that what earlier reformers had attempted to borrow from the West—constitutions, human rights, technological advancement—could not be plucked out of the present or awaited in the inevitable future, but had to evolve out of historical institutions, attitudes, and even contingency that could not be replicated very easily.

I advance a close reading of the debate to show how this historicized view of culture enabled particular ways of thinking creatively about cultural change that were not available to earlier reformers. For activists and scholars who promoted science, democracy, and the radical destruction of what they saw as China's traditional, “feudal” value system, culture's historicity may have denied the evolutionary promise of modernization. However, it made transformative change in Chinese social life imaginable in a different way, by underscoring the malleability of China's historical resources in constructing a new vision for a globalized, Westernized future. Young May Fourth iconoclasts such as Chen Duxiu (陳獨秀 1879-1942), for example, denied the Chinese past completely and attempted to create a new Western history within the Chinese future. From this radical perspective, the present age inaugurated a new era that attached itself to the Western rather than Chinese past, and as it unfolded, it

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*Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958).

<sup>3</sup> Li Changzhi, “Wusi yundong,” in *Li Changzhi wenji*, vol. 1 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2006), 24.

entered not a universal stage of history so much as a Europeanized one. More moderate opinion, in contrast, saw the contingency and historicity of Western cultural development as denying the subordination of China's "traditional" past. They heralded an open-ended global future in which China would play a central role. Influential intellectuals such as Du Yaquan (杜亞泉 1873-1923) and a pre-communist Li Dazhao (李大釗 1889-1927) urged a blending of civilizations from the present moment forward, to create a wholly new syncretic civilization in locales both Chinese and Western.

I begin with an overview of the basic positions in the civilizations debate, surveying earlier precedents as well as some of the key questions around which these conversations centered. I go on to discuss how these May Fourth innovations in historical consciousness facilitated the imagination of change in the present, by introducing new ways of thinking about the past and future. Although ostensibly about the character of "Eastern" and "Western" culture, the debates turned crucially on where participants located the position of China in history: was China's present the mark of a developmental laggard and a failed society, the recrudescence of a living and continuous tradition, or the site of a future global cultural syncretism? These questions stand in marked contrast to the late Qing reform strategies of thinkers such as Liang Qichao (梁啟超 1873-1929) and Yan Fu (嚴復 1854-1921), who grounded reform on "universal laws" (公理 *gong li*) of global evolution. It also contradicted nineteenth-century essence/use (体用 *ti/yong*) logic which tended to view culture as a repository of unchanging values outside of time. For both radical and moderate voices of the May Fourth movement, the same passage of time that gave rise to particular cultural formations in other civilizations in the past, is now seen to secure the possibility of those same cultural developments elsewhere, in the future. What these May Fourth thinkers shared,

then, was not so much a commitment to human universals, as many scholars have assumed,<sup>4</sup> but a faith that the future was the site of cultural transformation and possibility.

## Eastern and Western Civilizations

### *Earlier Iterations*

Theoretical speculation about the nature of differences between “Eastern” (or sometimes more specifically “Chinese”) and “Western” civilization emerged as early as the Opium Wars in the mid-nineteenth century. Perhaps its most well-known motif was *zhong ti xi yong*, “Chinese learning for essence (*ti*), Western learning for use (*yong*),” a formulation made famous by Zhang Zhidong (張之洞 1837-1909) in his 1898 tract *Exhortation to Learning (Quan Xue Pian)*. In this essay, written shortly after the unexpected and humiliating defeat of China in the Sino-Japanese war, Zhang offers a guardedly progressive call to Chinese elites to adopt in a more thoroughgoing way the instrumental features of Western learning (*Xi xue*).<sup>5</sup> At this time, “new” learning was often seen as identical with

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<sup>4</sup> Hutters, for example, characterizes the debate as a “contest over universal values.” *Bringing the World Home: Appropriating the West in Late Qing and Early Republican China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), Chapter 8; Duara also argues that “the critique of [hegemonic Enlightenment] History through culture...was linked to a redemptive universalist model.” Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 207.

<sup>5</sup> Zhang is often labelled a conservative, but as Tze-ki Hon persuasively argues, the *Quan Xue Pian* meant to strike a balance between conservative and radical reform. In that sense it was “part of the ongoing debate on how to change the country based on critical re-examination of its institutions and substantial borrowings from the West.” See “Zhang Zhidong’s Proposal for Reform: The *Quan Xue Pian*,” in *Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period: Political and*

“Western” learning, and even thinkers like Zhang—who included as one of the five main points of his *Exhortation to Learning* the need to “understand change”—did not construe newness as a historical concept.<sup>6</sup> Zhang claimed, for example, that the five relationships which constituted the essence of Chinese learning, and “are the origins of all activity,” had been “transmitted for several thousand years without changing their meaning.”<sup>7</sup> Chinese learning and Western learning were seen effectively to occupy the same synchronous time, leading to supporters of ti/yong to view each side as both distinctive from yet supplementary to the other.<sup>8</sup> Within this framework, newness did not signify a rupture in time so much as spatialized, cultural difference. Ironically, for Zhang these differences only served to bring into relief a foundational equivalence between China and the West with respect to key social hierarchies: the ruler/minister, parent/child, and husband/wife relationships in both places look very similar, Zhang argues, although the rites for maintaining them are quite “crude” in Western countries.<sup>9</sup> These hierarchical relationships are universal, to Zhang, because they form the basis of all political institutions and intellectual knowledge.<sup>10</sup> In other words, these

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*Cultural Change in Late Qing China*, ed. Rebecca E. Karl and Peter Gue Zarrow (Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), 79.

<sup>6</sup> Zhang Zhidong, *Quan Xue Pian (Exhortation to Learning)*, ed. Fengxian Li (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2002), 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>8</sup> Liu Longxin, *Xueshu Yu Zhidu: Xueke Tizhi Yu Xiandai Zhongguo Shixue De Jianli* (Taipei: Yuanliu chuban shiye, 2002), 27–28.

<sup>9</sup> Zhang, *Quan Xue Pian*, 34–36.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 36; as historian Liu Longxin has shown, however, the ti/yong binarism had the unintended effect of rupturing equivalences between the West and China, ultimately reducing Chinese learning to a series of distinct ethical principles rather than a more comprehensive

putative similarities not only demonstrate why China should retain its existing social structures; they also underwrite the very possibility of learning from the West. Only by building on shared foundations can China hope to succeed in exploiting Western knowledge.

Another group of reformers offered a more radical vision of cultural difference when they attempted to locate China along a path of evolutionary development. For some, such as Kang Youwei (康有為 1858-1927) and Tan Sitong (譚嗣同 1865-1898), this development would proceed through a series of increasingly peaceful stages, fueled by the extension of human benevolence (*ren*). It would culminate in a cosmopolitan “great unity” (*da tong*), when all differences separating humanity would be existentially overcome.<sup>11</sup> For their colleague Liang Qichao and the influential translator Yan Fu, however, the utopian future came only after a far more aggressive struggle for civilizational survival. Strongly influenced by the social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer, many of whose works Yan translated into Chinese, Liang and Yan saw history as driven by the domination of the stronger over the weaker. China could succeed in the global struggle, they argued, only if its people became invigorated with the spirit to defend and unify themselves as a nation.<sup>12</sup> Drawing from emerging work in sociology and anthropology, Liang called for a new history that would

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system of knowledge that could benefit and be benefitted by Western learning. Liu, *Xueshu Yu Zhidu*, 29–32, 49–50.

<sup>11</sup> Sitong Tan, *An Exposition of Benevolence: The Jen-Hsueh of T'an Ssu-T'ung* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1984); Kang Youwei, *Ta T'ung Shu: The One-World Philosophy of K'ang Yu-Wei*, trans. Laurence G. Thompson (Allen & Unwin, 1958).

<sup>12</sup> e.g., Yan Fu, “Lun Shi Bian Zhi Ji,” in *Yan Fu Ji*, ed. Wang Chi (Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1986); Yan Fu, “Yuan Qiang (On Strength),” in *Yan Fu Ji*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985), 15–32; Liang Qichao, “Xin Min Shuo,” in *Yin Bing Shi Zhuan Ji* (Shanghai: Zhonghua shu ju, 1936), 162.

understand China's progress toward the modern era in terms of struggle between and within groups.<sup>13</sup> Yan urged the cultivation of a promethean spirit of individualism—functioning very much like the psychic energy of Tan's benevolence—to drive forward the collective wealth and power of civilization.<sup>14</sup>

These reform positions were ultimately more radical because they turned not on synchronous cultural gaps, as Zhang Zhidong's formulations did, but on diachronic historical lags. On this view China appeared more tragically estranged from the West, because its lack of development seemed to deny the possibility that China already shared basic characteristics with successful civilizations. But reformers did not need to ground reform in existing cultural equivalence when history promised eventually to deliver China from its abject state. Being swept up in a global and inevitable trend toward the future—what Yan Fu identified with the “urgency of change in the world”—assured China's eventual convergence with Western nations and their stage of development.<sup>15</sup>

By 1915, confronting the fragility of the Chinese polity after the republican revolution, Chinese thinkers had begun to contemplate a more radical break with their own past.<sup>16</sup> They

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<sup>13</sup> Liang Qichao, “Zhongguo Shi Xulun,” in *Yinbingshi Heji-wenji*, vol. 6 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994), 10–12.

<sup>14</sup> Charlotte Furth, “Intellectual Change: From the Reform Movement to the May Fourth Movement, 1895-1920,” in *An Intellectual History of Modern China*, ed. Merle Goldman and Leo Ou-fan Lee (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 25–27; Benjamin Isadore Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964).

<sup>15</sup> Yan, “Lun Shi Bian Zhi Ji.”

<sup>16</sup> Chen Song, “Qian yan,” *Wusi qian hou Dong Xi wenhua wenti lunzhan wenzuan* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1984) [hereafter WSWX], 2-4.

continued to historicize the spatialized understanding of “new” that marked their reform predecessors, seeing East/West differences as conflicts between historical epochs and not only between different types of national quality or psychology.<sup>17</sup> But their explorations were increasingly tied to an erosion of confidence in the evolutionary models that drove late Qing reform thought, a turn with both domestic and international origins. Globally scholars were growing critical of models of orthogenic, teleological development. They began exploring instead a more historical approach, influenced by German romanticism. These new understandings of cultural growth were further developed by anthropologists such as Franz Boas, which resisted teleological determinism in favor of examining how individuals and groups interact with their material as well as social environments over time.<sup>18</sup> In China, a lack of confidence in evolutionary models was instigated by revolutionary policies of Sun Yat-sen’s Revolutionary Alliance (同盟會 *Tongmenghui*) which offered a voluntaristic alternative to natural laws of an inexorable history.<sup>19</sup> Reformers also increasingly came to see China’s backwardness as more intractable than they originally hoped. After 1911, Liang Qichao, in a series of influential articles published in his newly-founded journals *The Justice* (庸言 *Yong Yan*) and *New China Magazine* (大中華雜誌 *Da Zhonghua zazhi*), began to attribute the political failures of the new republican regime to China’s flawed national character.

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<sup>17</sup> Zhang Dainian and Cheng Yishan, *Zhongguo Wenhua Yu Wenhua Lunzheng (Chinese Culture and Cultural Debates)* (Beijing: Renmin chu ban she, 1992), 351.

<sup>18</sup> Peter J. Bowler, *Evolution: The History of an Idea* (University of California Press, 2003), 287–288; George W. Stocking, “Franz Boas and the Culture Concept in Historical Perspective,” *American Anthropologist* 68, no. 4 (August 1, 1966): 867–882.

<sup>19</sup> Furth, “Intellectual Change,” 38.

Liang's solution in some ways presaged the May Fourth movement, by urging a turn away from political reform toward cultural and social reform, or what Liang called "the work of society."<sup>20</sup> Chen Duxiu, in a 1915 essay first published in the radical political journal *New Youth* (新青年 *Xin Qingnian*), also traced China's inability to sustain a republican regime to its impartial grasp of what amounts to a holistic body of Western practices and thought. In Chen's view, the "old Chinese ways" (中國舊法子 *Zhongguo jiu fazi*) and the "new Western ways" (西方新法子 *xifang xin fazi*) each represented seamlessly coherent and interdependent wholes, whose contents were internally indivisible and irreducible. When juxtaposed, these old and new ways were "like fire and water, or ice and coal; they absolutely cannot co-exist. If you want both to be carried out together, then you will simply produce something that is neither fish nor fowl and neither [old nor new] will be successful."<sup>21</sup> Unlike Liang Qichao, however, Chen explicitly ascribes these "old ways" to civilizational characteristics: the "unifying spirit" of "Eastern peoples," Chen claims, lies in "contentment,"<sup>22</sup> but to succeed

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<sup>20</sup> Liang Qichao, "Zhengzhi Zhi Jichu Yu Yanlunjia Zhi Zhizhen," in *Da Zhonghua Zazhi*, reprint., *Jindai Zhongguo Shiliao Congkan Xubian* (Taipei: Wenhua chubanshe, 1915), 233–255; for further discussion see Zongmian Xu, "Shibaizhe De Tansuo: 1913-1915 Nian Jian Guanyu Zhongguo Ruhe Shixian Minzhu Zhengzhi De Taolun," *Lishi Yanjiu*, no. 4 (1984): 23–44; Leigh Jenco, "'Rule by Man' and 'Rule by Law' in Early Republican China: Contributions to a Theoretical Debate," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 1 (February 2010): 181–203.

<sup>21</sup> Chen Duxiu, "Jinri Zhongguo zhi zhengzhi wenti," 270. Unless otherwise noted, all page numbers for Chen Duxiu's essays refer to the reprints in *Chen Duxiu Wenzhang Xuanbian*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Sanlian, 1984).

<sup>22</sup> Chen, "Dong Xi minzu genben sixiang zhi chayi," *New Youth* 1.4 (December 1915).

as a republic they required the strenuous dynamism of Western civilizations to support human rights, drive evolution forward, and institute socialism—three components that Chen deemed both necessary and sufficient to constitute Western culture.<sup>23</sup>

This binary of Chinese or “Eastern” culture, characterized by spirituality and quietude, versus the “Western” culture of materialism and activity, is invoked throughout the New Culture and May Fourth movements to justify the need for both more moderate and more radical policies. It finds particularly bold articulation in Du Yaquan’s careful responses to calls by Chen, as well as by the “first voice” of the Chinese Renaissance, Huang Yuanyong (黃遠庸 1885-1915), for a totalistic reappraisal of Chinese culture’s future prospects.<sup>24</sup> The essays debating such views appeared in two of the most influential journals of the time, the *Eastern Miscellany* (東方雜誌 *Dongfang zazhi*, under Du’s editorship from the journal’s founding in 1904 until 1920) and the radical organ *New Youth*. According to historian Wang Qisheng, the Eastern and Western civilizations debate marks the first time two journals in China engaged in direct criticism of each other. Chen’s virulent (and inaccurate) attacks on defenders of Eastern civilization as imperial restorationists resulted in a publicity triumph for

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<sup>23</sup> Chen, “Falanxi ren yu jinshi wenming,” *New Youth* 1.1 (Sept. 15, 1915), 79.

<sup>24</sup> Hu Shi, “Wushinian Lai Zhongguo Zhi Wenxue,” in *Hu Shi Wencun* (Luoyang: Luoyang tushu gongsi, 1985), 180–261; Tse-tsung Chow, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), 272, 338. Huang had acquired his jinshi degree in the final year of the civil examinations, going on to study law in Japan before making his name as a Beijing-based special reporter for the Shanghai periodicals *Shibao* and *Shenbao*. He was the very first to call for a modeling of Chinese literature and thought on that of Renaissance Europe, but did not live to see the movement he heralded come to fruition. He was assassinated in San Francisco by an agent of Yuan Shikai in 1915 (see Hutters, *Bringing the World Home*, 211).

*New Youth*, which by 1919 had effectively traded places with *Eastern Miscellany* as the most widely circulated journal of the time.<sup>25</sup> Despite the acrimony of these debates, Wang Yuanhua has noted that they produced some of the first work in China to advance substantive comparative research on Sino-Western culture, which definitively shaped subsequent discussions of Westernization and cultural identity.<sup>26</sup>

Both sides array themselves around an East-West binary that, as a geographical trope, organizes the physical location of thought and its movements through space. In many ways their approach resembles that of the late Qing reformers, in that perceived failures of national character spatialize what are ultimately seen to be differences in historical development. For Kang and his colleagues, however, history was a unitary process. Its movement was unilinear and shared by everyone, even if certain societies lagged behind others in embodying its ultimate promise. Liang Qichao could therefore claim China's past had no place in world history, because it had previously lacked transformative contact with the West, which he saw as the most powerful embodiment of that historical telos.<sup>27</sup> It was on the basis of this immanent similarity to Western and all other nations in the world that China could mark its progress and find guidance for reform. With the civilizations debate, however, the spatial binary also marks how thought or ideas move through time *within* those spaces. History appears not as an unchanging yardstick to mark cultural difference, but as something that itself gives rise to, and bears traces of, diverse civilizational development. This historical consciousness did not as easily support arguments about the inevitable persistence of one

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<sup>25</sup> Wang Qisheng, "Xin Wenhua Shi Ruhe 'Yun Dong' Qilai De? Yi Xin Qingnian Wei Shidian," *Jindai Shi Yanjiu* 1 (2007): 31.

<sup>26</sup> "Du Yaquan yu Dong Xi wenhua wenti lunzhan," *Du Yaquan wencun*; reprinted in *Chensi yu fansi* (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2007), 99.

<sup>27</sup> Liang, "Zhongguo Shi Xulun 中國史敘論," 2.

cultural heritage over another, but rather encouraged exploration of how historical patterns of development could be replicated or manipulated in other locales and different futures.

Accordingly, these thinkers ask primarily about the kind of past that will inspire a particular kind of (Chinese) future. Is China's past one iteration of a more general, global phenomenon, such that continuing into the future can not only effectively draw from, but may require the pro-active imitation of, forms of Western modernity? Or does its own past offer one of the only coherent available platforms for building a better, truly global civilization? Moderate and radical responses to these dilemmas, I will argue, stem less from disagreements about the character or persistence of China's cultural heritage than about its capacity to serve as a foundation for future transformation, and what exactly that future might look like.

### *Moderate Views*

A key touchstone of the debate emerged when, in his 1916 article "Quietistic Civilization and Active Civilization," the influential editor of the *Eastern Miscellany*, Du Yaquan, suggested that the difference between Eastern and Western civilizations is not one of degree (*chengdu*) but of kind (*xingzhi*).<sup>28</sup> For Du, quietistic civilizations (*jing de wenming*) are best represented by Eastern cultures, the Chinese one in particular, and are characterized by fairly homogenous populations that emphasize nature over human agency, family over interactions with strangers, and minimizing conflict rather than accepting it as an inevitable part of existence.<sup>29</sup> The milieu for the active civilization (*dong de wenming*) is the city, with

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<sup>28</sup> Du Yaquan, "Jing de wenming yu dong de wenming," *Eastern Miscellany* 13.10 (October 1916), 338. Unless otherwise noted, all page numbers for Du's essays cited here refer to the reprints in Xu Jilin and Tian Jianye, eds. *Du Yaquan Wencun* (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 2003).

<sup>29</sup> Du, "Jing de wenming," 338-340.

its vibrant and complicated atmosphere; for a passive civilization, it is the countryside, with a comfortable and self-satisfied atmosphere.<sup>30</sup> Du believes these differences arise from a variety of distinct geographic and historical conditions that gave rise either to conflict and pluralism (in the Western case) or to self-sufficiency and homogeneity (the Chinese case). Because Western society developed not inland but on waterways, seacoasts, and peninsulas, for example, it tended toward heterogeneity, externally-oriented struggles, and individualism.<sup>31</sup>

Li Dazhao's 1918 essay "The Fundamental Differences Between Eastern and Western Civilizations" further elaborated the consequences of these historical contingencies, tying particular "activist" or "quietistic" features to the past material challenges of civilizations. According to Li, it was because Eastern civilizations—members of the "southern" belt of societies that Li identifies with Japan, Indo-China, India, Afghanistan, Egypt, and others—enjoyed so much economic prosperity and ease that they failed to cultivate the strenuous dynamism and ambition that characterizes the "northern" societies (among which he names Mongolia, Russia, Germany, Holland, Belize, England, France, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, and Italy).<sup>32</sup> Because the former had a bounty of women, for example, it promoted polygamy; but because the latter had fewer women than men, it promoted single-wife families. In fact, northern belt societies had to fight for survival, forcing their peoples to migrate frequently in search of stability and food. This encouraged simpler, smaller families, Li explains, which in turn led to an emphasis on individualism. Because Eastern civilizations did not feel there was value to fighting for anything, and (as a result of their family structure) did not value

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<sup>30</sup> Du, "Jing de wenming," 341.

<sup>31</sup> Du, "Jing de wenming," 338-9.

<sup>32</sup> Li, "Dong Xi wenming genben zhi yi dian," *Yan zhi* 3 (July 1918); reprinted in Chen Song, *WSWX*, 57.

individual effort, they tend even now to pessimism and fatalism; in contrast, Western civilizations had to struggle constantly for survival, endowing them with a strong optimism in human agency to transform the future, and cultivating what Li calls (using English words) the “creative progressionism” [*chuang hua zhu yi*] that is the characteristic of “active” civilizations.<sup>33</sup>

These historical causal narratives add greater dimension to moderate resistance to New Culture radicalism, but not because they signal intransigent allegiance to some fixed Chinese past or reject “Westernization.” In fact, Du embraced Western science very early in his life, studying calculus and algebra in his early twenties before going on to teach in Western schools and translate books on chemistry and physics.<sup>34</sup> Both Li and Du use their historical narratives of civilizations to project futures for East and West, urging an eventual syncretism of both to take place not only in China but in the world itself. Noting the warm reception in Germany of their colleague Gu Hongming (辜鴻銘 1827-1928) and his popular English-language tracts on Confucian ethics, these moderates suggest that this hybrid future form—what Li calls “a new third civilization” beyond both East and West—will salve a battered Europe as much as invigorate a subordinated China.<sup>35</sup> As China’s “second contribution” to world thought, Li Dazhao believes, this move would combine together “the best parts” of Eastern and Western civilization, blending the former’s quietism into the latter’s activism.<sup>36</sup> This possibility turns, however, on Chinese historical developments substituting for Western ones. As Du explains,

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<sup>33</sup> Li, “Dong Xi wenming genben zhi yi dian,” 58.

<sup>34</sup> Liu Shaotang, ed., “Du Yaquan (1873-1933),” *Minguo Ren Wu Xiao Zhuan* (Taipei: Zhuan ji wen xue, 1975), 71.

<sup>35</sup> Li, “Dong Xi wenming genben zhi yi dian,” 60.

<sup>36</sup> Li, “Dong Xi wenming genben zhi yi dian,” 62.

The path to salvation lies precisely in integrating our original civilization, systematizing its foundations so as to render it lucid, and where it has mistakes to correct them. On the one hand we must strenuously import Western theories, and allow them to blend with our original civilization. The fragments of Western civilization are like money strewn on the ground; we can use our original civilization as a thread to tie them together. The wide variety of Western theories today, when you at first hear them, seem to be incompatible with our original civilization; but then when you understand them more fully, you can see that they can enhance and develop certain parts of our original civilization.<sup>37</sup>

Part of the problem with using Western civilization as a foundation, Du argues, is that it lacks the unity and continuity of Chinese civilization. In the past few centuries and most notably during the current war, European values have fragmented, with the result that borrowing them leads only to increasing confusion and incoherence. Although some Western ideas—science, democracy, constitutionalism—offer promising solutions to China’s current problems, their “activistic” qualities offer no integrated system adequate to direct the future course of world civilization.<sup>38</sup> Responding to Chen Duxiu’s insinuation that by supporting particular aspects of Chinese civilization he is necessarily opposing republican government, Du points out the similarities between indigenous ideals and Western regime types.

Political regimes may change, but the political principles [behind them] do not.

Therefore, taking our indigenous civilization, with ‘the way of the ruler, the integrity

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<sup>37</sup> Du, “Mi luan zhi xiandai ren xin,” *Eastern Miscellany* 15.4 (April 1918), 367.

<sup>38</sup> Du, “Mi luan zhi xiandai ren xin,” 363.

of the official, and traditional moral teaching' [君道臣节名教纲常jun dao, chen jie, ming jiao gang chang] as its foundation, and blending it with modern political forms in a fully coherent way, is indeed something that a proper civilization [正統文明 zhengtong wenming] can do.<sup>39</sup>

The Chinese cannot adopt features of activist civilizations, in other words, if they repudiate their own past heritage; doing so would be to obliterate the civilizational unity endowed to the Chinese by history and which alone makes possible their cultural development.<sup>40</sup>

Significantly, Li and Du do not characterize these historical conditions, or the future developments they enable, as universal ones; different civilizations are not all aligned along the same track. Each follow their respective organic path forward. At the same time, however, these historical conditions are not so unique to particular civilizations that the migration of certain practices or ideas across cultural boundaries is constrained. Du believes that the existing Chinese civilization contains enough similarity with the Western past to inaugurate a syncretic, partially-Western future on Chinese soil. But unlike Zhang Zhidong, who two decades earlier posited universal human hierarchies as the shared basis upon which Western learning could proceed in China, Du sees these similarities as serendipitous coincidences. Democracy and science could flourish in China not because they were autonomous practices independent of their civilizational and social milieus, but precisely

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<sup>39</sup> Du, "Da Xin Qingnian zazhi jizhe zhi zhi wen," *Eastern Miscellany* 15.12 (December 1918), 371. Du is responding to Chen's "Zhi wen Dongfang zazhi jizhe," *New Youth* 5.3 (September 1918). For discussion of the tensions between Du's advocacy of civilizational integrity and his commitment to blending old and new, see Wang Yuanhua, "Du Yaquan," 99-100.

<sup>40</sup> Du, "Mi luan zhi xiandai ren xin," 363.

because their reliance on this cultural background could already be partially supplied by the existing Chinese civilization. Li goes farther, to explore the possibility that the past historical conditions of one civilization could be replicated in the future of the other. He suggests that transformations in the economic and social conditions of both Asian and European peoples may be enough to effect transformations in their thought, if not in the present then in the future—once they generate a history whose contingencies provoke the proper characteristic responses and lifestyles. “It is a reality that you cannot easily get results [by borrowing from the West]. Yet if in daily life we practice it and accept its positive influence, so that we begin to be immersed [in it], a quietist life will be changed into an activist one,” and vice-versa.<sup>41</sup>

From this perspective, Gu Hongming’s efforts in Germany to promote Confucian ethics as an alternative to postwar materialism are the most prominent demonstrations of this capacity for cultural mobility. In his book *The Spirit of the Chinese People*, published in English in 1915, Gu singles out Confucianism’s emphasis not on abstract ethics but on the cultivation of the “gentleman,” which ties individual behavior to his family and to the state in an integrated, normative ethos of loyalty and filiality. “The Spirit of the Chinese People,” Gu explains, “is a state of mind, a temper of the soul, which you cannot learn as you learn shorthand or Esperanto; in short, a mood, or in the words of the poet, a serene and blessed mood.”<sup>42</sup> Gu’s reception in Europe was documented in Ping Yi’s (平佚) 1918 essay “Critiques of Chinese and Western Civilizations” (中西文明之评判 Zhong Xi wenming zhi pingpan), which lists various German responses—both supportive and critical—to Gu’s call

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<sup>41</sup> Li, “Dong Xi wenming genben zhi yi dian,” 66.

<sup>42</sup> *The Spirit of the Chinese People* (Beijing: Peking Daily News, 1915), 72.

to Europeans to embrace Eastern spiritualism.<sup>43</sup> Although none of these German intellectuals seem ready to embrace this version of Confucianism wholesale, Gu's invitation suggests to what degree Chinese moderates and conservatives saw "Eastern" civilization as a mobile, if sticky and complex, repository of historically accumulated value, rather than a set of cultural characteristics permanently inhering in some particular ethnic group.

### *Radical Views*

This emphasis on the radical mobility of both Chinese and Western values, lifestyles, and even historical trajectories belies radical accusations (most prominently launched by Chen Duxiu around 1918) that Du and his colleagues hoped to restore the feudal Chinese past in the modern present.<sup>44</sup> The more striking difference between these two positions lies not in some professed allegiance either to the past or the future, but more precisely in their disagreement over how and if the inauguration of "new thought" depends on a particular kind of past. Moderates tended to see a new future syncretized from currently-localized civilizational characteristics, which—precisely because they took shape within the trajectory of an existing civilization—could also be seen as imminently mobile across space, given enough time. Radicals, in contrast, attempted to efface the legacy of the Chinese past entirely. The mobility of cultural or civilizational characteristics for these radicals was made possible

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<sup>43</sup> Ping Yi 平佚, trans. "Zhong Xi wenming zhi pingpan" (Critiques of Chinese and Western Civilizations), *Eastern Miscellany* 15.6 (June 1918); original published in Japanese in *Dongya zhi guang* (*Light of East Asia*).

<sup>44</sup> Chen Duxiu, "Questions for the Writers of the *Eastern Miscellany*" (*Zhi wen Dongfang zazhi jizhe*) *New Youth* 5. 3 (September 1918), Sec. 2. He also rather perfunctorily dismissed the possibility of Europeans learning from Chinese civilization as "rigmarole" (*meng yi*).

precisely by rejecting the characterization of Chinese history as a trove of fruitful similarities to the Western past.

In the 1916 essay “The Conflict Between Old and New,” which was published posthumously one year after its author, Huang Yuanyong, was assassinated in San Francisco, Western historical events are arrayed in temporal ways to foreground their generality rather than cultural or spatial specificity. Like Li Dazhao, Huang depicts Western thought as historically rooted, but for Huang this history has produced not a reified set of civilizational characteristics so much as a body of discourse that has changed through time in response to new challenges and ideas. Huang identifies three stages in the transformation of all thought—the age of unawareness, the age of critique, and the age of consolidation of doctrines—yet historical variegation does not, for Huang, comprise an adequate measure of “old” and “new.”<sup>45</sup> Newness lies as much in the content of thought (*sixiang*) as in its periodization. To enter the (relatively newer) age of critique, the Chinese must oppose the (older) age of unawareness by rejecting the “old”—which Huang summarizes as advocacy of dogmatism rather than criticism, force-based government rather than self-control, integration rather than analysis, and deduction rather than induction. Only then can the Chinese embrace the proper content of thought that for Huang epitomizes the new.<sup>46</sup>

By selecting temporal terms rather than spatial ones, Huang attempts to culturally dissociate “new thought” in general from the specificities of Western experience. In doing so, he hopes to establish the grounds for its possibility in other spaces and times. “Today people like to say that each nation has its own history and habits, and they cannot be forced to be all the same. Of course this is true; but actually this ‘dissimilarity’ should be understood to be

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<sup>45</sup> Huang, “Xin jiu sixiang zhi chongtu,” reprinted in *Du Yaquan wencun*, 358.

<sup>46</sup> Huang, “Xin jiu sixiang zhi chongtu,” *Eastern Miscellany* 13.2 (Feb 1916), 361.

relative, not absolute.”<sup>47</sup> Huang cannot extricate new thought from Western thought as completely as he claims, however, for the very reason that he can neither supply a Chinese equivalent to new thought nor sensibly periodize Western history in terms of old and new. The very historical story he offers turns on a substantive rather than temporal parsing of those terms, where his examples of “progressive,” “new” thought are culled as often from the Western past—namely the scientific spirit of the ancient Greeks—as from the present. For these reasons he remains unable to explain on what basis Chinese can enter, and by way of what force they can be driven along, the stream of historical time that transforms their thought from one age to another.<sup>48</sup>

Huang’s colleague, Chen Duxiu, more directly handles the problem of historically situating the progress to “new thought.” He does this not by severing the connection between newness and Westernness, as Huang does, but by transposing a Chinese future onto a Western past. In his essay “The Year 1916,” sometimes read as a call to Chinese youth to insert themselves in a stream of modern time, Chen clearly marks the present as the mediator between the past and future.<sup>49</sup> Significantly, however, he locates that past not in Chinese time but in that of “humanity” (*renlei*) and “the world” (*shijie*), two categories he comes to conflate with Western civilization, even as their presence in Chinese space can be established by a distinctly new and temporal attitude on the part of China’s youth:

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<sup>47</sup> Huang, “Xin jiu sixiang zhi chongtu,” 358.

<sup>48</sup> A similar three-stage model of thought (from unawareness to critique to consolidation) would eventually be offered by Liang Qichao in his *Qing dai xueshu gailun*. But there, Liang had read these stages as explicitly cyclical rather than progressive: *Qing Dai Xueshu Gailun* (*Summary of Scholarship Under the Qing Dynasty*) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2005).

<sup>49</sup> Lee, “Incomplete Modernity,” 32.

In order to give birth to this century, we must hold our heads up high and accept the responsibility of becoming twentieth century people, create the twentieth century civilization, and not remain dominated by nineteenth century civilization. The progress of human civilization replaces the old with the new, like the flow of water or the path of an arrow; each age transforms and follows from the other.<sup>50</sup>

Chen formulates this radicalism, significantly, largely on the assertion that the Chinese people lack a history. It is their inability to exhibit change across time that condemns their culture to stagnation and justifies the assumption of a new, Western future: “[As for] Eastern peoples, from the time of hunter-gatherers all the way to [the establishment of] kinship society to now, nothing has changed...kinship society takes family as the standard, and the individual has no rights.”<sup>51</sup> For Chen, only the West has a history. By adopting Western ideas, China is, in essence, assuming that history as its own, joining other nation-states as their common history unfolds in modern time and progresses to the future.

In light of this radical call to arms, Du’s invocation of China’s “indigenous” civilization appears as a defense of a present state whose characteristics he believes can continue into the foreseeable future. Du, after all, does not defend the past but rather attempts to give compelling content to a very *present* form of life, albeit one rooted in a particular historical trajectory and geographic location (Eastern versus Western, countryside versus city), that contrasts with the form of life defended by Chen and other radicals as explicitly “Western.” Underlying Chen’s assertion, in contrast, is the insight that only by adopting a culture which turns on dynamism, activity, and deliberate efforts at change can temporal

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<sup>50</sup> Chen, “Yi jiu yi liu nian,” 101.

<sup>51</sup> Chen Duxiu, “Dong Xi minzu genben sixiang zhi chayi,” 98.

distinctions (between past and present, present and future) even be meaningful. Chen and Du conflict, it seems, over more than the normative weight of Chinese and Western civilization; they also disagree about how to characterize the present moment as an inaugural point for China's future.

### **Envisioning Change**

Reading the Eastern and Western Civilizations debates as conflicts over historical understanding suggests new contours to the characteristic agendas of the New Culture and May Fourth movements. These movements do not simply represent a political match between “traditionalists,” who resist modernity out of futile allegiance to an extinct past that they hope to revive, and “radicals,” who blindly destroy a past heritage in the name of progress. Their disagreement rather stems from different responses to the question: In what, or *whose*, history can China be said to belong? The temporal processes assumed in their conversations thus do more than ascribe Eastern or Western cultural products to particular streams of “modern” or “traditional” time, as scholars of Chinese modernity have noted.<sup>52</sup> Spatial terms mark not only the locales in which knowledge circulates, but also the particular pasts—and thus futures—toward which Chinese thinkers align themselves. Their particular ways of thinking about change, then, do not drive their view of Eastern and Western civilizations, but rather emerges out of their exploration of those alternative historical models.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> e.g., Levenson, *Confucian China*; Lee, “In Search of Modernity.”

<sup>53</sup> c.f. Hutters, *Bringing the World Home*, 206, who argues that “the disposition of each thinker toward the nature of and the possibility for change colored his views of where these changes were to come from and how they were to be effected.”

These civilizational histories offered alternatives to the universal, homogenous trend of evolution envisioned by late Qing thinkers, which portrayed social and political change in terms of the gradual alignment of Chinese particularity with the European nation-state form. Robert Culp has recently argued that, for many of the Republican-era intellectuals influenced by this vision of a universal, homogenous, and evolving world civilization, “simultaneous but different trajectories of social, economic, and political change were difficult to imagine.”<sup>54</sup> Participants in the civilization debates, in contrast, wrestle with a growing awareness that all cultures or civilizations have a historical career whose experiences encouraged the development of certain institutions and attitudes and discouraged others. This awareness gives rise to the relatively novel idea that different civilizations may occupy a shared global space without enduring the same processes of time—their historical developments may be mutually out of joint. The rifts between their respective historical careers undercuts beliefs that earlier had sustained claims to shared global similarity. No longer did thinkers assume that the world’s civilizations are inevitably heading in the same direction, arose from the same source, or possess permanent values or proclivities somehow isolated from the flow of time.

It was not the homogeneity of a universal time, then, that compelled Chen Duxiu to demand a break from China’s past. If he could assume that Europeanization was an inevitable global trend, he would be better able to picture (as Liang Qichao did) China’s past

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<sup>54</sup> Robert J. Culp, “‘Weak and Small Peoples’ in a ‘Europeanizing World’: World History Textbooks and Chinese Intellectuals’ Perspectives on Global Modernity,” in *The Politics of Historical Production in Late Qing and Republican China*, ed. Tze-Ki Hon and Robert J. Culp (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 240.

as the embryonic form of a Western future.<sup>55</sup> Instead, precisely because the civilizations debate had introduced the possibility of multiple, civilizationally distinct historical trajectories, Chen had to think about the present as a site for enacting the future *without* assuming continuity with the Chinese past. His creative solution is to re-draw the path of continuity, connecting China's present to the world's future rather than to China's own past. China becomes part of the world not by contributing its accumulated cultural essences to a global *mélange*, but by working in the present and future to unite its fate with that of the emerging global order. In practice, of course, drawing that connection was quite difficult, and not only because no "Western" models of development ever offered clear and unambiguous guidance. It was also the case, as Sang Bing explains in another essay in this journal, that the very definition of continuity was elusive. Establishing in China a supposedly more modern and "authentic" vernacular, for example, simply shored up a particular and static version of language that defied the very evolutionary and cosmopolitan principles driving language reform in the first place.<sup>56</sup> For Chen, however, the process of tying China's present to Europe's future presented a series of very clear and deliberate choices between Western values (represented by "Mr. Democracy" and "Mr. Science") and Eastern ones:

If you want to endorse Mr. Democracy, you cannot but oppose Confucian religion, the system of rites, chastity, old ethics, and old government. If you want to endorse Mr. Science, you cannot but oppose old art, old religion. If you want to endorse Mr.

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<sup>55</sup> Peter Zarrow, "Old Myth into New History: The Building Blocks of Liang Qichao's 'New History,'" *Historiography East & West* 1, no. 2 (July 2003): 212, 215.

<sup>56</sup> Sang Bing, "The Divergence and Convergence of the Written and the Spoken Languages: Reassessing the Vernacular Language during the May Fourth Period," this issue.

Democracy, you cannot but endorse Mr. Science, and you cannot but oppose national essence and the old culture.<sup>57</sup>

In other words, he envisions the project of modernization and even “Westernization” in *political* terms: its promise is secured not by history but only by human agency working in and through time.

Ironically, precisely because moderate opinion had raised the possibility of alternative trajectories—and thus alternative ways of reading China’s past—Chen was able to provide a partial answer to the paradox of fate versus agency that plagued Liang, Kang and Yan at the turn of the century. As Charlotte Furth has observed, their beliefs in the inevitability of unilinear, world-historical progress were paired with a persistent anxiety over its relative incompleteness at any given time.<sup>58</sup> These anxieties rendered deeply ambivalent the role of the reformer as a historical actor: if the end of history is inevitable, what role could any reforming sage possibly play?<sup>59</sup> How could sages remain helpless to stop changes in the world, but at the same time be responsible for holding China back?<sup>60</sup> In contrast, Chen understands the future as the outcome of choices, not the unfolding of a series of inevitable transformations. The realization that such political choices needed to be made constitutes the Chinese people’s “final awakening,” in which they “take stock of the basic trends going on inside and outside,” and begin to ask about “what stage our people and our nation ultimately

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<sup>57</sup> Chen, “*Xin Qingnian zui an zhi da bian shu*,” *New Youth* 6.1 (January 15, 1919), 317.

<sup>58</sup> Furth, “Intellectual Change,” 16.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 16–31.

<sup>60</sup> Yan, “Lun Shi Bian Zhi Ji”; for discussion, see James Reeve Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 54.

occupy. What stage of actions ought they to take?”<sup>61</sup> For Chen this awakening is necessarily first political, and then ethical. It involves coming to terms, first, with the fact that the people, not their leaders, are the primary motors of change and transformation in society; and second that this political capacity is at odds with the ethics of hierarchy that structured political life in traditional Chinese society.<sup>62</sup> China’s future demands breaking free of the “inertia” (*duo xing*) that effaced China’s history and rendered its people incapable of republican rule.<sup>63</sup>

For Du Yaquan and Li Dazhao, this inertia stems from the embeddedness of societies in historically situated “civilizations.” Despite Chen’s accusations, however, neither Du nor Li claims that the Chinese must be forever bound to replicate in the present and future whatever social patterns they happen to have exhibited in the past (as, for example, Liang Qichao concluded in 1904 after his tour of American Chinatowns.) Du can coherently speak of Chinese “happily putting themselves in the middle of [active society],” and identify a minority Chinese population of “active” types, without for that reason contradicting himself about the nature of China’s “quietistic civilization.”<sup>64</sup> Moderate disagreement with Chen lies not so much in their rejection of Western institutions, ideas, or even “modernity,” but in their rejection of the possibility that China’s future can be grafted unproblematically and immediately onto a Western present (rather than the other way around). New ways of living demand not only political choices and ethical re-orientations, but a domestic historical background to supply the continuity underlying all development—much as Li Dazhao

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<sup>61</sup> Duxiu Chen, “Wu Ren Zui Hou Zhi Jue Wu (Our Last Awakening),” *Xin Qingnian* 1, no. 6, Reprinted in Chen Duxiu Quanji, Vol. 1, pp. 105-109 (February 15, 1916): 105.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 107–109.

<sup>63</sup> Chen, “Tiaohe lun yu jiu daode,” *New Youth* 7.1 (December 1919); reprinted in Chen Song, WSWX, 229.

<sup>64</sup> Du, “Jing de wenming,” 341, 343.

implied that a blending of quietistic and activist civilizations would demand that Chinese history become the West's future, and vice-versa.

Their position presages Li Changzhi's later critique of the failures of the May Fourth movement, which blames radicals not for their extremity but for their shallowness. Their movement, to Li, "was a rushed replay of Western intellectual evolution—once they stepped onto another person's path, they had to relive that historical experience."<sup>65</sup> Radicals like Chen failed to recognize, in other words, that the West, too, had a particular history that both produced and sustained its existing practices, and without reproducing this history they could never effectively grow this cultural transplant in "the rich nutrients of [their] native soil."<sup>66</sup> Du Yaquan's understanding of this historicity emerges only uncertainly, as he seeks reasons for how the originally existing (*gu you*) Chinese civilization could enjoy normative supremacy over the Western one, independently of any particular quality inherent in it. Others, such as Li Dazhao, work more forthrightly with the historical embeddedness implied by the civilization vocabulary. Li seemed to believe that China in the future would have to grow a past equivalent to that of the West's in order to replicate its institutions, and that Western nations would also have to adopt particular Chinese forms of life in order to take advantage of the benefits of "quietistic" civilizations.

In neither case is the past understood as simply a repository of values, the perpetual and unchanging Chinese "essence" that gives meaning to equally unchanging Western "use." "The West" and "China" appear in these conversations as both targets and agents of deliberate, time-dependent, and contested cultural appropriation. They are spaces whose past is not so much a known entity as it is a source of emergent meaning, which derives from, rather than gives rise to, contested visions of an uncertain future. Elaborations of "Eastern"

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<sup>65</sup> Li, "Wusi yundong," 25.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 26, 24.

and “Western” characteristics endow particular pasts with normative weight, but these pasts function to induce dilemmas of choice about the future, rather than to decisively and inevitably point in one direction rather than another. From moderate perspectives, these civilizational tropes mark objects of imitation and thus of mutual transformation in a synthetic future. From more radical perspectives, they are targets of appropriation or rejection whose contrasts only serve to underscore how uncertainly China’s path matches that of the West.

In any case, the plasticity of historical consciousness enabled May Fourth thinkers of both camps to investigate the slow and uncertain process of how ideas are diffused across space, transmitted through time, and come to have meaning within localized but not impermeable communities. These new ways of looking at culture may have facilitated the sweeping visions of civilizational transformation offered by Liang Qichao and Liang Shuming in the 1920s. The latter’s reworked evolutionism—now rid of the value hierarchy between East and West<sup>67</sup>—turned precisely on the assumption that particular civilizational characteristics migrate across spaces to embody global patterns of evolution.<sup>68</sup> For the former, it became possible to revoke modernity as a progressive temporality, and to discover instead “a dynamic anthropological space in separate but interacting cultural systems, which became accessible and appreciable only in a new global imaginary of difference.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> For discussion, see Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, Chapter 7; Guy Alitto, *The Last Confucian: Liang Shu-ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

<sup>68</sup> Liang Shuming, *Dong Xi Wenhua Jiqi Zhexue* (Taipei: Liren Shuju, 1983).

<sup>69</sup> Xiaobing Tang, *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity :the Historical Thinking of Liang Qichao* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1996), 8.

## Conclusion

When the synthesis, rejection, or appropriation of Western norms and practices is understood as a process that takes place in and through time, their diffusion becomes a matter of deliberate selection in the present, open to future contingency. The East-West civilizations discourse reveals just how fragile, and ambivalent, is the future of “Western” civilization in the “East”—a contingency that undercuts claims to the universality and naturalness of Western histories, claims, and knowledge.<sup>70</sup> Far from shoring up Western modernity as a universal goal, these May Fourth attempts to emulate and resist it actually contest *a priori* claims about its normative status or applicability of its ideas, institutions, and way of life. Even for radical perspectives such as Chen’s, who see a clear similarity of values among all the “ordered” countries of the world, the West and its values are the objects of political action, and no longer the telos of history.<sup>71</sup> The debate therefore troubles the *persistence* and permanence, if not existence, of the discursive authority of the modern West.

Ironically, this instability of Western modernity—or at least, its delegation from the category of historical certainty to political promise—makes available new space to envision China’s place in the modern world. In understanding localized cultural characteristics as emerging from a past whose future transmission was radically indeterminate, participants clear ground for the recognition of global difference. They also, however, enable new forms of connection between otherwise disparate groups, by showing how the very passage of time which endowed civilizations with particular characteristics facilitates rather than inhibits the adoption of those characteristics elsewhere. For proponents of the radical argument, the

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<sup>70</sup> I am speaking here of *conceptual* inevitability only, and do not mean to suggest that these thinkers could somehow throw off colonial threats or Euro-American hegemony to make fully unimpeded, autonomous choices about the future of their community.

<sup>71</sup> Chen, “Wu Ren Zui Hou Zhi Jue Wu (Our Last Awakening),” 107.

mobility of Western science and democracy enabled Chinese modernization. From a more moderate perspective, the integrity of Chinese civilization assures the success of Western cultural grafts, even as the historically tight but now uncertain attachment of Confucian ethics to its native society becomes rearticulated as a capacity for their broader application to non-Asian societies, most particularly postwar Europe.

The point of their “Eastern” and “Western” tropes, then, may not be to sort civilizational characteristics into categories of the inevitably universal and the irredeemably particular (read: “cultural”), but to facilitate the travel of cultural products and practices across the spatial as well as temporal boundaries originally seen to contain them. By denying the inevitable inherence of cultural characteristics in particular persons or groups, the May Fourth debate reveals “East” and “West” to be spatial categories deeply contingent on human actions to situate communities within a variety of alternate trajectories. These thinkers thus made it possible to see the future, and not only the past, as a site of cultural identification and possibility.