

New Humanism

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In a rapidly globalizing world, the development of modern Chinese culture in the twentieth century was inevitably a global process. Local competitions in the literary field reflected global trends, even as these drew on local cultures in interactions not readily describable in binary terms. During the May Fourth period radical thinkers of the New Cultural Movement, including Hu Shi (1891–1962) and Lu Xun (1881–1936), celebrated Westernization, and their proposals rapidly became normative.¹ However, the consecration of the New Cultural Movement cannot be fully understood apart from other cultural trends or the sociopolitical discourses of national salvation, modernization, and globalization: the dynamism of the era arose from the competition among individuals and social groups for status in the literary field. During this highly selective, highly exclusive process of icon formation, paradoxically only the most iconoclastic prevailed. Yet counternarratives remained to challenge the radical New Culturalists, among which one, New Humanism, was also a modern system of thought founded in the West. Thus Chinese New Humanism provides us with a rich case study of the mechanisms regulating cultural production. Furthermore, reexamining the questions it raised will help us rethink the problems of Chinese modernity, which went awry at certain critical historical moments. In the age of globalization, rethinking New Humanism's historical roles will provide valuable references for resisting the dominance of global capitalism.

Chinese New Humanism was the product of the intensified global interflow of ideas and personnel. Originally proposed by Irving Babbitt (1865–1933) and Elmer More (1864–1937), and inspired by Buddhist and Confucian philosophies, New Humanism opposed the moral decline fostered by relativist and determinist beliefs and by an increasingly materialistic American society. The movement's central mission was to find a universally applicable code for humanity based on traditional philosophical teachings of the East and the West. New Humanism was introduced into the Chinese intellectual environment by Babbitt's disciples Wu Mi (1894–1978), Hu Xiansu (1894–1968), Mei Guangdi (1890–1945), and Liang Shiqiu (1903–87). Learning about New Humanism through the perspectives of the West, these overseas students reflected on the problems in China. Through Babbitt's teaching, they saw a possible universal solution both for general human problems and for

particular Chinese defects. They also realized, however, that it was problematic to take the modern West as their sole model, since Western society had internal problems and contradictions of its own. From Babbitt's high regard for Confucius as a humanist, Wu, Hu, Mei, and Liang regained their confidence in the value of China's own tradition, which had been marginalized by the New Cultural reformers. Babbitt's students went home to challenge the "overall Westernization" championed by the New Cultural Movement thinkers and to propose their own vision of modern Chinese literature and culture.² From the 1920s to the 1930s New Humanism haunted the literary field by functioning, though not exclusively so, as a counternarrative to the hegemonic views in the literary field.

Consequently, New Humanism was tarred as a shadow of the New Cultural Movement. In the 1935 edition of the Compendium of Modern Chinese Literature (Zhongguo xinwenxue daxi), the first collective effort to canonize modern literature through historiography, New Humanism was slighted as "reactionary" to the New Literature (xin wenxue) in the introduction" (dao yan) to its second volume "Literary Debates" (wenxue lunzheng ji) written by Zheng Zhenduo (1898—1958).³ Both May Fourth radicals and the New Humanists deliberately polarized the divide between them and tried to distinguish their own intellectual standing, which led to irreconcilable antagonism without a buffer. Once the May Fourth radicals had become the new cultural icons, New Humanism was repressed and consigned to oblivion in the literary-historical annals of mainland China.

The reality, of course, was more complicated than the official story. In early-twentieth-century China intellectual trends such as radicalism, conservatism, liberalism, and New Humanism, and their literary manifestations of classicism, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism, and interacted. Within the dynamic they formed, they not only contradicted but also infiltrated, complemented, stimulated, and mirrored each other. As the core component of the New Cultural Movement, literary revolution became a discourse in China with the publication of Hu Shi's "Preliminary Proposal for Literary Reform" ("Wenxue gailiang chuyi") in New Youth in 1917. Hu's radical proposal had been generated through debates with Mei and other New Humanists in America. Hu argued that the mission of literary revolution was to adopt a new literary language, without which new thoughts and spirit could be neither expressed nor conveyed to their audience. He believed that in the twentieth century classical Chinese was a "dead language" and should give way to the "living" vernacular. Originally as a friend and later as an enemy of Hu, Mei held views increasingly divergent from Hu's after studying with Babbitt and becoming a passionate proponent of New Humanism in 1915. Mei did not oppose literary revolution in general. What he contested was Hu's idea of taking vernacular language as the model to follow, since it was not refined and therefore lacked eternal value. It was mainly Mei's challenge that pushed Hu to develop his ideas of reformation.⁴

Like the hegemonic narratives it countered, Chinese New Humanism was not

a unified cultural movement. It was a set of cultural choices among a loosely associated group of intellectuals. These choices, although historically repressed, were not dismissible singularities but instead were conditions indispensable to the functioning of the literary field. In this essay I delineate the roles New Humanism played in China, its internal contradictions and problems, and its intricate relationship with the hegemonic narratives about cultural production by examining the literary practices of three New Humanists who demonstrated, respectively, ideal/academic, political, and transcendental ways of engagement.

In the early 1920s the New Humanists announced their vision of Chinese culture in response to the rise of the New Cultural Movement. They gained the name Critical Review school (Xueheng pai) from the journal the Critical Review, which they founded in Nanjing in 1922 to publicize their ideas.⁵ A passionate professor at Southeastern University in Nanjing and the editor of the Critical Review, Wu Mi played a central role in the circulation of New Humanism in China, incorporating its ideas into the curriculum and pouring his energy and personal funds into the journal. During its eleven-year lifetime the Critical Review published sixty-nine essays on Western culture, twenty of them on New Humanism (Wang, "Preliminary Study," 94–95).⁶ The journal also published essays on Chinese culture per se and in comparison with Western culture. Some essays criticized the New Cultural Movement. The appearance and practices of New Humanism determined the journal's conservative image in the cultural field, especially when "promoting the national essence" became part of the journal's mission.

New Humanists countered the Western-oriented Chinese modernization project with a holistic view of culture that transcended time and space. They insisted that classical culture should not be deserted but, as the expression of life's universal truths, should serve as a reference for the construction of the new culture. In other words, the new culture was to be not an invention breaking with the past but a gradual transformation of tradition. The New Humanists opposed the Darwinian, linear progressivism of the New Cultural Movement. Though it might hold some validity in the natural sciences, technology, commerce, and industry, they contended that in the humanities lay the timeless truths. Thus the newness that granted the radicals cultural capital was disqualified from setting the criteria for cultural creation. As the embodiment of universal truth, traditional learning was to be the resource of and final judge for modern cultural production. Traditional literary languages, modes of expression, and styles should be revered. Yet the New Humanists did not reject the West, as old-fashioned conservatives usually did. Rather, they considered the truth of humanity not only timeless but also spaceless. Different cultures equally manifested it; none of them could exhaust it. For New Humanists, there were substantial connections and resemblances between traditional Chinese culture and Western cultures.

Their differences were secondary. They were equal branches of an integral human life that could illuminate each other in their different ways of articulating the same truth about humanity.⁷

The New Humanists regarded the New Cultural radicals as superficial, narrow-minded philistines who were mistaken both in their denial of the value of traditional Chinese culture and in their reduction of the West to its modern period.⁸ Following the decadent fashions of the twentieth-century Western world, the May Fourth radicals, with their “pseudo-Europeanization,” would lead Chinese culture into a debacle. While criticizing the views of May Fourth radical intellectuals, the New Humanists proposed alternatives. According to Mei, building a new culture would be a forty- to fifty-year project undertaken by erudite scholars with expertise in both Chinese and Western learning. They needed to do thorough research, make sound judgments, and apply refined methodologies.

New Humanism helped Wu reimagine the subjectivity of Chinese culture. Born in Shanxi province, Wu received an excellent traditional education. In 1917 he was sent to study at the University of Virginia. In 1918, influenced by his friend Mei, Wu entered Harvard University to study under Babbitt and soon subscribed to his gospel of New Humanism. After all, New Humanism was not alien to him, since it was informed partly by traditional Chinese culture. Wu admitted that by “learning from Mr. Babbitt and Mr. More, I can say that I indirectly inherited the Western tradition and absorbed its core values. Carrying these back home, I can better understand the merits of Chinese culture and the greatness and righteousness of Confucius.”⁹ For Wu, the value of traditional Chinese culture lay not in its Chineseness per se but in its universal validity and perpetuity. In his understanding, Chinese culture was based on Confucianism and supported by Buddhism. Western culture was born of the union of Greek and Roman philosophies and literatures with Christianity. To create a new culture, it was necessary first to understand these old cultures (“On the New Cultural Movement,” 15). In the light of New Humanism, Wu reinterpreted concepts such as “self-denial and return to propriety” (*keji fuli*), “faithfulness and forbearance” (*zhongshu*), and “the golden mean” (*zhongyong*) of the Confucian school as necessary tenets for the modern human being.¹⁰ Wu’s acceptance of New Humanism, therefore, was a journey to explore and reaffirm the universal value of traditional Chinese culture, which he accorded a status equal or superior to that of Western culture.

However, these ideal ideas encountered difficulty in practice. Despite Wu’s hard work in editing, *Critical Review* was a failure, one of many problems encountered by New Humanism on a practical level. After its debut, the journal unwisely waged war on the May Fourth radicals and promoted the use of classical Chinese as its own exclusive medium. On behalf of the New Cultural Movement, Lu Xun criticized Wu’s proposal for scholarship, pointing out inconsistencies between Wu’s argument and examples, on the one hand, and his imperfect grasp of

historical context, on the other.¹¹ Lu Xun also derided the Critical Review as “nothing more than the fake aura of some fake antiques gathered at Nanjing,” noted numerous misuses of classical Chinese, and concluded that the journal’s proposals were not worth the public’s attention, since the authors themselves could not carry them out flawlessly.¹² Though Lu Xun acknowledged that his criticism was based only on volume 1, and though he never critically analyzed the theories behind New Humanism, the damage to the journal’s image was irreparable. Indeed, as Liang wrote, potential supporters of New Humanism were scared off by the journal’s use of classical Chinese.¹³ Generally, the Critical Review school paid too much attention to secondary issues, such as “promoting the national essence” and using classical Chinese; as a result, what was originally the main thrust of New Humanism became a side issue in the cultural debates. The New Humanist group held similar theoretical positions, yet on an organizational level its conflicts about editing were left unsolved. Mei proposed a spontaneous style of editing, but Wu insisted on a more structured one. Wu acknowledged Lu Xun’s criticism and complained that it had not been his decision to publish the pieces by Shao Zuping (1898–1969) on which much of that criticism centered. Dissatisfied, Mei and Hu left for America again in 1924 and 1925, respectively. Thereafter Mei never published in the Critical Review. Wu’s effort to sustain the journal was misunderstood by his colleagues as an overbearing will to control. He showed his disappointment in his diary:

The Critical Review is a public instrument for China and for the world, not the private property of its initial dozen members. It is not a private organization but the ideally most perfect and lofty journal. Therefore I devoted myself to it and worked carefully day after night to edit the cautiously chosen materials. I also recruited a highly qualified staff. What I wanted was improvement. If it always publishes Mr. Shao Zuping’s works, how can the Critical Review be any different from the Beijing and Shanghai tabloids run by degenerate literati? What purpose does it serve in today’s China? Why should I waste my time and energy on it?¹⁴

The journal also suffered financially. It had been set up as a purely academic nonprofit organization, funded by its members. At the beginning it received institutional support from the vice president of Southeastern University, Liu Boming (1887–1923), but this ended after his death. To avoid political interference, the journal’s editors rejected potential donations from politicians. In 1933, the year Babbitt died, Wu quit his job, unable to solve the internal disagreements and financial difficulties. The Critical Review canceled its publishing contract with Zhonghua Press, which had complained about its low sales. Soon it ceased publishing.

If Wu's practice was fundamentally academic, although unavoidably ideological, Liang expressed the political potential of New Humanism. In the late 1920s and 1930s, with the rise of proletarian movements, the literary field was dominated by Marxism, intermingled with Leninism and Stalinism because of the mediation of Russia and the USSR. The progressive-minded young Marxists stigmatized the New Cultural radicals as bourgeois, conservative, and reactionary or as the "dregs of feudalism" (fengjian yunie). Once again the New Humanists, especially Liang, stood against this hegemonic discourse. Liang had started his literary career as a believer in the radical ideas of the New Cultural Movement and Romanticism. In 1923 he praised Byron's poems as emancipating, and in 1924 he went to Harvard, intending to challenge New Humanism.¹⁵ But after taking courses with Babbitt, he gave up his original ideas on literature and became a convert ("On Mr. Babbitt," 211–17). Liang came to perceive literature as a Romantic and classical binary, and he now criticized the New Cultural Movement as Romanticist, irrational, chaotic, and lacking in discipline, elegance, abstinence, and any appreciation of literary form.¹⁶ His criticism was seconded by Zhou Zuoren (1885–1967). In the literary field Liang was distinguished by the polemical challenge, proceeding from his understanding of humanity, that he posed to Marxist views of literature. Humanity transcended the limitations of race, nation, and, most important in Liang's argument, social class.¹⁷ Indeed, Liang insisted that universal humanity was the only legitimate theme of literature. He particularly criticized the instrumentalization of literature by Marxists, who manipulated it as a weapon for class struggle.

Liang was involved in several debates with the Marxists. His main opponent was Lu Xun, who converted to Marxism in the late 1920s. Lu Xun faced harsh attacks from a group of young orthodox Marxists at that time. Having witnessed the bloody slaughter of communists by nationalists in 1927, he observed the limitation of social Darwinism and experienced a personal crisis. In his debate with Liang, Lu Xun admitted that he had turned to Marxism to find not only a method of analyzing society but also a means to self-reflection. Most young Marxists in the literary field were members of the former Creation Society (*Chuangzao She*) and the Sun Society (*Taiyang She*), such as Guo Moruo (1892–1978). Guo had positioned Lu Xun as the "dregs of feudalism," who did not understand the ideology of the bourgeoisie, to say nothing of the ideology of the proletariat. Lu Xun was a "double antirevolutionary" (erchong fangeming) to both capitalism and socialism. Guo's attacks had induced Lu Xun to explore Marxism, to engage in the leftist movement, and finally to become its figurehead. However, Lu Xun was unsatisfied with the reductive, dogmatic, and clannish views of other Marxists. Occasionally his criticisms and Liang's coincided. However, Lu Xun's disagreements with other Marxists became secondary once he had started to debate with Liang, because his position determined his way of argument: speaking for a group while retaining his

own understanding of Marxism. Therefore, from a Marxist perspective, Lu Xun was not representative. Nevertheless, he became Liang's major opponent, though possibly because of his prestige rather than his Marxist views. For younger challengers in the literary field, debating a prestigious figure is risky, but it offers the chance of amassing cultural capital.

Liang's basic position was undeniably aristocratic, and the same was generally true of New Humanists both in China and in America. Liang claimed that good literary works were the preserve of social elites, inaccessible to most.¹⁸ He insisted that a small number of geniuses created civilization and deserved to lead the masses.¹⁹ In his view, revolutions occurred when leaders lacked humanity; their mission was to get rid of unqualified leaders, not to subvert the political system. He attributed social stratification to differences in talent among members of society. In most cases, Liang did not equate the proletariat with the uneducated majority. Yet his analysis of the proletariat was condescending and unavoidably bourgeois:

Originally, the proletariat did not have class consciousness. It was their merciful and radical leaders who brought it to them. This concept [class consciousness] is merely a tool that the leaders use to unite them and to motivate them to fight. A member of the proletariat can accumulate some property if he is ambitious. He only needs to work hard and to be honest his whole life long. This is the legitimate way to struggle for one's living. After it becomes united, however, the proletariat becomes a class. Its members want to have organization. They are a group. As a result, they start to assume political and economic power by unconventional means and become the ruling class. They want revenge. But their only instrument to achieve it is their populousness. "Majority," "mass," and "group" are the weapons for them to use to rebel. ("Does Literature?" 110)

The proletariat was obviously not Liang's concern when he discussed literature. Lu Xun mocked his attitude as that of a rich dignitary in ancient times, who taught poor workers to climb up to the upper class by their honest labor.²⁰ This criticism associated Liang's opinion with that of the bourgeoisie and called his vaunted disinterest into question.

There is tension in Liang's theories. His aristocratic point of view did not lead to the promotion of a partisan literature for the upper classes, nor did it keep him from proposing a literature of universal humanity. Universal humanity became the cornerstone of Liang's arguments in criticizing Marxist views of literature. However, he never gave humanity a clear definition or description. He admitted that it "is a complicated issue (and who can clearly state the elements of it?). However, it is this complicatedness that make it possible for us to analyze it: imagination and emotion are subjected to reason."²¹ This humanity is beyond the regulation of time, space, and social strata. Liang admitted that the agony embedded in historical

contexts, such as imperialist invasion and oppression from warlords, could be the subject of literature. However, it was more important for literature to represent universal concerns, such as life's vicissitudes, the sense of being played by destiny, or one's inner hesitation and conflict. Liang argued that a worker and his boss possess an identical humanity, whatever differences of inheritance, education, and economics separate them. They feel the same uncertainty about life and death. They both desire love. They both may take pity or be paralyzed with terror, and they both have ethical ideas ("Does Literature?" 112). Obviously, Liang replaced the concrete sociopolitical contents of humanity with abstract psychological categories. He did not, as other New Humanists would have done, refer to great philosophical teachings, to rationality, or to morality in illustrating universal humanity. The leftist camp responded quickly. Lu Xun pointed out that in a class-based society, humanity, sentiments, and agonies were deeply rooted in social distinctions, which made a universally shared humanity impossible ("Hard Translation," 236).

Given the unresolved contradiction between universality and hierarchy, Liang admitted that universal humanity had not been sufficiently elaborated. Still, it became the foundation on which he based his vision of the literary world and pursued an agenda that would deny the Marxist literary framework and the social practices associated with it. For Liang, revolution was an unacceptable disturbance of normal social and moral order. The proletariat as a social class was not a real entity but a fabrication that enabled the poor and their leaders to gain power. For him, since literature belonged to the realm of the universal, temporal events should be excluded from it. Liang regarded revolution as an event within a limited social environment that had nothing to do with literature. The "revolutionary literature" promoted by Marxists thus became an oxymoron. In response, Lu Xun defended the proletariat's appropriation of literature for its own ends. Social position predetermined people's tastes. He reasoned that if literatures describing an unchanging universal humanity were great literatures, then literatures concerning the biological features of human being would be much greater in that they were much more universal.²²

After Liang went to Taiwan, he continued to criticize Lu Xun. Liang regarded his arguments not merely as strategies to counter the rise of Marxism, however, but as lifelong beliefs guiding his literary practice. In his later years he gave up literary criticism and devoted himself to essay writing and translation. Liang's essays evoke a nostalgic world enhanced by refined tastes in daily life and by "normal" human emotions aloof from the problems of race, nation, politics, class, and gender. These essays manifested his view of humanity more vividly than his literary criticism. Liang also single-handedly translated all the works of Shakespeare, to him the very incarnation of the universal humanist.

It was Lu Xun's younger brother, Zhou Zuoren, who bridged the vast gap between

New Humanists and the May Fourth radicals. Zhou started his literary career as the leading literary theorist of the New Cultural Movement. One of the most learned men of letters in his time, he was influenced by various intellectual trends. He refused to subscribe to any particular one to the exclusion of others; nor could he synthesize them into a theory of his own. He approached New Humanism not through Babbitt or other Chinese New Humanists but through a reflection on the whole modernization project. In fact, Zhou criticized the Critical Review in the early 1920s as a way to express his anxiety about the possibility of an archaist movement opposed to modernization.²³ After the ferment of the New Cultural Movement, Zhou distanced himself from the mainstream May Fourth intellectuals when he realized that the promoters of the new culture behaved exactly the way proponents of the “old” would have done: once dominant over the literary field, they would secure their position by repressing dissidents. Disillusionment motivated him to rethink the logic of modernity in the Chinese context. Though Zhou was not a professed New Humanist, his rationalism, comprehensive knowledge of classical and modern humanities, respect for Confucianism and Greek culture, promotion of self-cultivation, rejection of the institutionalization or instrumentalization of literature, and skepticism toward progressive secularism made him a model figure of New Humanism. Furthermore, Zhou endorsed and enriched New Humanism, whose leaders had focused mainly on classical literature, with knowledge from the modern humanities and sciences.

In 1918 Zhou set the humanistic tone for New Literature, which had some similarities with New Humanism.²⁴ He advocated “individualistic humanism” (geren zhuyi de renjian benwei zhuyi), which became a constant theme throughout his life. In this initial statement he argued that New Literature needed to have a humanistic nature, because human beings had evolved from animals. On the one hand, humans had basic desires that were identical to those of animals and should not be repressed by cultural conventions; they were legitimate and needed to be respected. On the other hand, humans should not overindulge in sensual pleasures, for the internal life of a person was much more sophisticated and refined than that of an animal. The human body and soul were in a harmonious relationship. Zhou’s dualistic view of humanity was based on his understanding of Western culture, which drew on Greek and Jewish beliefs that emphasized the “flesh” and the “soul,” respectively. A normal human life existed within the range set by these two parameters. This became clearer in “Requirements for New Literature,” in which Zhou argued that New Literature “is humanistic. It is not animal in nature. Neither is it divine.”²⁵ His argument was not only based on traditional Western culture but also drew on Zhou’s own encyclopedic knowledge of cultural anthropology, sexual psychology, folk culture, and biology, all of which provided insights into human life and feelings and into the laws of things (renqing wuli). In 1940s he expressly promoted a “Confucian humanism,” which for him possessed the fundamental spirit of world culture. Zhou held his basic theoretical position when some of his peers

changed. He considered that humanity either fell, constrained by cultural conventions, into a world dominated by desire or rose into a transcendental domain of belief, depending on historical context.

Beginning in the late 1920s, Zhou observed that the gravest threat to humanity came from forms of belief, whether secular or religious, that succumbed to irrationality. From this perspective, the goals of a belief appeared unattainable, yet its adherents tended to become deluded into pursuing their ideals at any cost while attacking other beliefs. As a result, they renounced their individuality and merged into mobs, whose frenetic emotions unavoidably led to violence. Zhou's conclusion was based mainly on his readings in medieval religious history, Chinese cult activity, and Japanese Shinto. To show how extreme and absurd a belief could become, he included in many pieces examples of churches burning people alive to rescue their souls. He used the Boxer Rebellion to analogize the fanatical xenophobia in vogue among intellectuals under the name of patriotism and nationalism. In general, Zhou was fond of Japanese culture, but he disapproved of Shinto, since it enchanted people into an irrational state of mind. He even attributed Japan's invasions of and ruthless killing in other Asian countries to Shinto. However, he did not simply deny the power of belief but provided a rational analysis of it. In his account, salvation through belief was impossible, but belief still symptomatized normal psychological needs, through which human agonies, sentiments, and spiritual requirements were expressed. Zhou reinterpreted religious writings as documents of secular literature or philosophy, not as enunciations of the truth. He traced the possible connections between the Bible and modern Chinese literature both in ideas and in expressions.²⁶ He cited Ecclesiastes in reflections on how human beings face the vanity of living in an ultimately meaningless world. His answer was to observe the madness and absurdity in the human world from a distance, even though nothing was new under the sun and nothing could be changed.²⁷ Zhou expressed the feeling of solitude and the desire to join with others by discussing a Buddhist rite to build up interpersonal ties in the next life.²⁸ In analyzing a Chinese local cult, Hongyang Jiao, he explored the longing to return to an ultimate home in response to a call from the Eternal Mother.²⁹ He himself followed Buddhist rites at his mother's funeral. He also portrayed himself as a Buddhist monk and in so doing marked his distance from the mainstream. Zhou's recognition of religion as an expression of inner feeling was a denial of institutionalized religious belief. For his own purposes, he displaced the central idea of belief while retaining its form.

Zhou also took belief as an epistemic protomodel with which to carry out literary and social criticism. Religious belief revealed sociopsychological problems; it reflected and allegorized the whole of modern Chinese society on a structural level. Speculating on quasi-religious phenomena, Zhou rejected contemporary social movements, including the nationalist and communist movements, as systems of belief. In his view, so-called modern society was not modern, because the "new"

social movements repeated the logic of the old ones. "There is nothing new under the sun" became his motto. In 1925 he cited his favorite writer, Havelock Ellis (1859–1939), to express his rejection of the idea that the world progressed linearly toward a telos.³⁰ However, in a world without a transcendental and teleological aim, how should human beings live? To observe life dispassionately and to enjoy the moments in a leisurely way against the background of a chaotic world became his only choice:

We are all on the way [to death]. Some laugh and sing, thinking of going to heaven. Some cry, thinking that they are going to hell. Some are drunk and sleeping. We just want to go slowly, seeing the scenery pass by, listening to others talk, and trying to enjoy the bitterness and joy we deserve. As for the route, whether it is from Xisi Pailou [a place in Beijing] to the south or from Dongdan Pailou [a place in Beijing] to the north, what does it matter?³¹

Zhou also took issue with idol worship. For him, the problem with the New Cultural Movement lay not in its iconoclastic critique of tradition but in its replacement of old icons with new ones. Among these, he singled out his elder brother to attack. In Zhou's view, Lu Xun had betrayed his earlier commitments in favor of Marxism and had pursued status as a new idol, which he enjoyed. Zhou's comments may have been influenced by the brothers' broken relationship. Nevertheless, he was astute when it came to the unchanging pattern of power relations during the social transitions of his time. The new idols worked as priests to lead the masses to the ideal place—the communist society—which in Zhou's eyes was as false as paradise. For that reason Zhou was unwilling to join the communist, or any institutionalized, movement. He expressed his suspicions mostly in an indirect manner by alluding to religious texts when writing about communism. The communist movement was doomed to bring violence and disaster, which happened often during his time. Zhou denied the legitimacy of instrumentalizing literature for propagandistic purposes in social movements. The purpose of literature was to reflect on the quotidian life of individuals, not to carry an ideological message; literature that did the latter betrayed itself. However, Zhou did not propose to replace politicized literature with a literature of undisciplined human emotions and irrationality. He conceived of a literature dealing with "normal" themes in a rational, individual, and sober style. For this reason he preferred essays to poetry. In his essays he blended his mediated subtle feeling, manifold knowledge, and rational ideas.

What remained of importance for Zhou was to enjoy everyday life after denying the transcendental. The year 1928 marked his self-exile from direct reality to the self-sufficient world of knowledge.³² He started to observe social and intellectual problems from a historical perspective, exploring and constructing the quotidian world. He devoted himself to writing about leisure activities, gardening,

pets, customs, food and drink, folklore, daily rites, bathrooms, and festivals. In his reading notes on the reading notes by intellectuals from the Ming and Qing dynasties, Zhou praised those who focused on daily life but regretted that such writings were rare. Most intellectuals, concerned with morality, civil service examinations, and politics, remained naive about the richness of human sentiments. One's attitude toward everyday life became Zhou's criterion for an intellectual. The quotidian life Zhou imagined was not value-free. Rather, it reflected his indirect criticism of grand narratives. In the quotidian world all such narratives, about revolution, class, and the usefulness of literature, were irrelevant. Everyday life took center stage and became the ultimate signifier of the significance of human life.

The contest of New Humanism with cultural hegemonies provides a unique yet problematic perspective from which to rethink the logic of Chinese modernity. In The Monster That Is History David Der-wei Wang shows how enlightenment turned dark, how revolution became a bloodthirsty monster, and how the fancied utopia turned out to be dystopia.³³ It is exactly through the continuous repression of challenging narratives such as New Humanism that monstrosity becomes part of our history. As a counternarrative, New Humanism tried to provide a universally valid proposal to transcend the restrictions of political reality and historical context. The nonsituational, nonhistoricizing approach of New Humanism, however, was just as problematic as, if not more so than, the targets of its criticism. New Humanism's failure in China was a consequence not merely of repression at the hands of hegemonic powers but of the movement's own shortcomings.

Unable to institutionalize itself, New Humanism achieved only limited influence, but for this very reason it could not be manipulated as a political tool. Its position at the periphery of the cultural field enabled it to form a relatively independent cultural space in which academics could develop. Prestigious scholars such as Wang Guowei (1877–1927), Chen Yinke (1890–1969), Tang Yongtong (1893–1964), and Liu Yizheng (1880–1956) all had close relationships to the Critical Review. The practice of Wu fostered the birth of comparative literature as a discipline in China. Wu is even credited as the father of that discipline.³⁴ In 1979 Wu's best student, Qian Zhongshu (1910–98), published his magnum opus in comparative literature, Limited Views (Guanzhui bian).³⁵ Qian's voluminous work can be regarded as the result of numerous imagined seminars attended by scholars of different disciplines in the humanities from the East and the West throughout time. Qian wrote in classical Chinese, which raised some eyebrows but also reflected the lingering charm of New Humanism in the cultural sphere.

In the post-Cultural Revolution era, writers and critics started to criticize the revolution by appealing to universal humanity and other liberal thoughts. Historical traumas, alienation from humanistic values, and disillusionment about the veneration of Mao were abundantly expressed. The criticism even led to suspicions

about the socialist state ideology itself and the goals of communism. In response, the Chinese Communist Party launched two political counteroffensives: The “Antispiritual Pollution” movement in 1983 and the “Antibourgeois Liberalization” movement in 1987–88. In the 1990s, facing the expansion of New Liberalism, some scholars in Beijing and Shanghai initiated a debate about “humanistic concerns”; anxious about the growth of materialism, they called for intellectuals to champion the preservation of humanistic values in China. In the age of globalization, New Humanism could be rejuvenated to counter the New Liberalist logic of global capitalism, which only celebrates the freedom of capital, and to explore alternative ways for people to imagine their lives.

Notes:

¹In the conventional view, the New Cultural Movement marks the beginning of modern Chinese history. In 1915 a group of intellectuals with backgrounds in modern Western education started a reformation in the cultural and literary fields.

²Hu Shi tried to replace “overall Westernization” with “sufficient worldization” (chongfen shijiehua) to reduce the misunderstanding about his proposal in a lecture given in 1935. However, “overall Westernization” has become the definitive label for the May Fourth radicals’ proposal.

³Zhao Jiabi, ed., Compendium of Modern Chinese Literature (xinwenxue daxi) vol. 2 (Shanghai: Liangyou tushu gongsi, 1935), 13. Hereafter cited as Compendium.

⁴See Hu Shi, “An Unwilling Rebel”, in Compendium vol.1, 53.

⁵See Wang Quangen, “A Preliminary Study of the Critical Review,” in Interpreting Wu Mi (“Wu Mi zhubian xueheng zazhi de chubu kaocha,” in Jiexi Wu Mi), ed. Li Jikai and Liu Ruichun (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2001), 82–101; hereafter cited as Interpreting.

⁶The essays on New Humanism were compiled in Liang Shiqiu, ed., Babbitt and Humanism (Bai Bide yu renwen zhuyi) (Shanghai: Xinyue Shudian, 1929). This is the earliest introduction to Babbitt’s thought in book form in China.

⁷Wu Mi, “On the New Cultural Movement,” in Opinions from a School of Thorough Understanding: Wu Mi’s Works (“Lun xinwenhua yundong,” in Huitong pai rushi shuo: Wu Mi ji), ed. Xu Baogeng (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe, 1998), 15.

⁸Mei Guangdi, “On the So-Called New Cultural Movement Participants,” in Zhao, Compendium, 148.

⁹Wu Mi, "Poetry Talks in an Empty Pavilion," in Poetry and Essays of Yuseng ("Kongxuan shihua," in Yuseng shiwenji) (Taipei: Dipingxian Chubanshe, 1971), 454. Quoted in Interpreting, 268.

¹⁰See Li Weimin, "On Wu Mi's View of Traditional Culture" ("Lun Wu Mi de chuantong wenhua guan"), in Interpreting, 149–68.

¹¹Lu Xun, "A Theory of the Universally True," in Collected Works of Lu Xun ("Yishi zhi xueshuo," in Lu Xun quanji dierjuan), vol. 2 (Beijing: Renminwenxue Chubanshe, 1973), 114–16.

¹²Lu Xun, "Assessment of the Critical Review" ("Gu xueheng"), in Collected Works, 98–101.

¹³Liang Shiqiu, "On Mr. Babbitt and His Thought," in Liang Shiqiu's Works on Literary Criticism ("Guanyu baibide xiansheng jiqi sixiang," in Liang Shiqiu piping wenji), ed. Xu Jingbo (Zhuhai: Zhuhai Chubanshe, 1998), 212; hereafter cited as Criticism.

¹⁴Wu Mi's Diary (II) (Wu Mi riji [di 2 ce]), ed. Wu Xuezhao (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 1998), 256.

¹⁵Liang Shiqiu, "Byron and Romanticism," ("Bailun yu langman zhuyi"), in Criticism, 12–31.

¹⁶Liang Shiqiu, "The Romantic Tendency of Modern Chinese Literature," ("Xiandai zhongguo wenxue zhi langman de qushi") in Criticism, 32–51; Liang, "Literature and Revolution," (Wenxue yu geming), in Supplement to the Compendium of Modern Chinese Literature (Zhongguo xinwenxuedaxi xubian), vol.1, ed. Xianggang Wenxue Yanjiushe (Hong Kong: Xianggang Wenxue Yanjiushe, 1968), 106; hereafter cited as Supplement.

¹⁷For Liang, gender seems to have been an exception in this universal model of humanity. He disagreed with the call for gender equality and insisted on the essential difference between male and female. See Liang Shiqiu, "Rousseau on Women's Education," ("Lusuo lun nü zi jiaoyu"), in Selected Works of Lu Xun and His Opponents in Debate 2 (Lu Xun he tade lundi wenxuan vol.2) (Beijing: Jinrizhongguo Chubanshe, 1996), 565–68; hereafter cited as Debate vol.2.

¹⁸Liang Shiqiu, "Does Literature Have a Class Nature?" ("Wenxue shi you jiejixingde

ma?"), in Supplement, 113.

¹⁹Liang Shiqiu, "Literature and Revolution" ("Wenxue yu geming"), in Supplement, 101.

²⁰Lu Xun, "'Hard Translation' and 'the Class Nature of Literature'" ("'Yingyi' yu 'wenxuede jiejixing'"), in Supplement, 235.

²¹Liang Shiqiu, "The Disciplines of Literature" ("Wenxue de jilü"), in Criticism, 105.

²²Lu Xun, "Literature and Sweating" ("Wenxue he chuhan"), in Debate vol.2, 576–77.

²³Zhou Zuoren, "Tendencies in the Intellectual Circle," in Talks about Tiger (vol.1) ("Sixiang jie de qingxiang," in Tanhu ji [vol.1]) (Hong Kong: Shiyong Shuju, 1967), 137–39.

²⁴Zhou Zuoren, "Literature of Humanity," in Art and Life ("Rende wenxue," in Yishu yu shenghuo) (Shanghai: Zhonghua Shuju, 1936), 11–30.

²⁵Zhou Zuoren, "Requirements for New Literature" ("Xin wenxue de yaoqiu"), in Art and Life, 34.

²⁶Zhou Zuoren, "The Bible and Chinese literature" ("Shengshu yu zhongguo wenxue"), in Art and Life, 63–86.

²⁷Zhou Zuoren, "Chasing the Wind," ("Weida de bufeng"), in Selected Essays of Zhou Zuoren (Zhou Zuoren sanwen chao) (Hong Kong: Yixin Shudian, 1974), 97–101.

²⁸Zhou Zuoren, "The Bean for Forming Relational Ties," in Mellon and Beans ("Jieyuan dou," in Guadou ji) (Hong Kong: Shiyong Shuju, 1969), 250–55.

²⁹Zhou Zuoren, "A Message from the Eternal Mother," in Zhitang's Essays from the Year Yiyou ("Wusheng laomu de xinxi," in Zhitang yiyou wenbian) (Hong Kong: Sanyu Tushu Wenju Gongsi, 1962), 28–41.

³⁰Zhou Zuoren, "Reflections by Ellis: Progress," ("Ailisi 'ganxiang lu' chao: jinbu"), in The Long Sunny Day (Yongri ji) (Hong Kong: Shiyong Shuju, 1972), 131–48.

³¹Zhou Zuoren, "A Man Searching His Way" ("Xunlu de ren"), in Talks about Tiger

vol.2, 392.

³²Zhou Zuoren, "Reading behind the Closed Door" ("Bihu dushu lun"), in The Long Sunny Day, 255–62.

³³See David Der-wei Wang, The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

³⁴Zhao Lianyuan, "Wu Mi—the Father of Comparative Literature in China" ("Wu Mi—zhongguo bijiaowenxue zhifu"), in Interpreting, 302–11.

³⁵An abridged version is available in English. See Qian Zhongshu, Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters, trans. Ronald Egan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1998).