New Confucian Liang Shuming's Transformation of John Dewey’s Philosophy in Chinese Rural Education

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Abstract

During the May Fourth period, the clash of ideas of democracy and science with Confucian tradition had a great impact on the Chinese intellectual community, consisting of modern intellectuals and traditional scholars. In response to the prevailing anti-traditionalism during the May Fourth period, Liang made great efforts to retain and reform Confucianism. This paper highlights the effects of Confucian tradition and John Dewey's pragmatism on Chinese rural education during the Republican period by studying Liang Shuming’s educational thought and practice. By exploring a philosophical ‘dialogue’ between Liang Shuming and John Dewey, this paper demonstrates how the intersection of traditional and modern aspects shaped Chinese rural educational reform during the 1930s.

Keywords
New Confucian – Liang Shuming – transformation – John Dewey’s philosophy

1 Introduction

John Dewey’s sojourn in China from 1919 to 1921 overlapped with the May Fourth/New Culture Movement in Chinese history. Such a historical coincidence brought about a fascinating conversation between Deweyan pragmatism and the May Fourth era. During this period, the clash of the ideas of democracy and science with Confucian tradition divided the Chinese intellectual
community into two opposite camps: liberal intellectuals and traditional scholars. However, in different ways, both camps reached out to the philosophy of John Dewey in the context of the May Fourth movement.

Most of Dewey’s Chinese followers were pro-liberalism intellectuals who advocated for the substitution of Confucianism with a Western value system. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, a group of Chinese educators, most of whom had studied with John Dewey at Columbia University, strived to adopt, transport and apply Deweyan pragmatism to Chinese education on a wide range of issues, including literary revolution, higher education reform, civic education cultivation, and rural reconstruction. Hu Shi (Hu Shih, 胡适), Jiang Menglin (蒋梦麟), Guo Bingwen (郭秉文), Tao Xingzhi (陶行知), and Chen Heqin (陈鹤琴) were notable representatives of this group.

Unlike the majority of John Dewey’s Chinese students, Liang Shuming (梁漱溟 1893–1988) never studied abroad during his lifetime. Compared to Dewey’s Chinese followers, Liang took a firm stance in favor of cultural traditionalism. His unrelenting effort in practicing and disseminating Confucianism in modern China led to some scholars calling him ‘The Last Confucian’ (Alitto, 1979). Dewey had been dubbed the ‘Modern Confucius’ by some Chinese intellectuals, on his arrival in China (Keenan, 1977). Liang had pursued the Chinese rural reconstruction movement in the late 1920s, and intensively studied Dewey’s pragmatism, writing about his reflections on the American educator’s idea of education.

In this paper, I examine the ways in which Confucian teachings and Deweyan learnings interacted in Liang Shuming’s educational thought and practice. The purpose of the paper is to answer a crucial question: How did Liang find a way to combine his educational experience in Confucianism with his journey into Dewey’s pragmatism? The answer to this question relies on examination of Liang’s interpretation and application of Dewey’s educational philosophy to the dimension of his New-Confucian views. By exploring a philosophical ‘dialogue’ between Liang Shuming and John Dewey, this paper demonstrates how the intersection of traditional and modern aspects shaped Chinese rural educational reform in the 1930s.

2 Neo-Confucian Father Figure and the Formula of nei sheng and wai wang

During Liang Shuming’s formative period, his father, Liang Ji (梁济 1958–1918), played a critical role in shaping and strengthening his belief in Confucianism. As a former Neo-Confucian official-scholar of the late imperial period,
Liang Ji advocated the pathway “from being the sage on the inside” (nei sheng 内圣) to “being kingly on the outside” (wai wang 外王) in the face of China’s unprecedented challenges. Wai wang, a concept from Confucianism strongly emphasizes Confucian scholars’ commitment to achieving outstanding accomplishments in political affairs, which could bring order and prosperity to the entire empire. Following this conviction, Liang Ji believed that all learnings or teachings were futile unless they were beneficial to empowering the country (Liang, 1989). Therefore, the Neo-Confucian father rejected the classical civil service-oriented examination and instead supported a new style of education (Liang, 1989). In 1906, one year after the ending of the imperial civil service examination, Liang Ji sent 13-year old Liang Shuming to a new middle school in Beijing, the capital, where the teenage boy could learn practical knowledge (shi xue, 实学). Inspired by his father, Liang Shuming then embarked on a lifelong dedication to the cause of national salvation (Ma, 1992).

Of the twin neo-Confucian concepts, nei sheng had a greater impact on Liang Ji compared with wai wang. In fact, the discourse of Neo-Confucian philosophy since the Song-Ming period (960–1644) revolved around this very idea. In contrast to wai wang, nei sheng mainly focuses on the perfection of individual inner morality, which was regarded by Neo-Confucian scholars as the root of all things good. Consequently, when emphasizing the significance of the spread of practical knowledge in Chinese society, Liang Ji asserted that “the purification of people’s hearts” (zheng ren xin) should be the determining factor for achieving the goal of national salvation (Alitto, 1979). From the Neo-Confucian father’s perspective, the development of a Confucian scholar into being ‘sage inside’ should become a requirement for the realization of being ‘kingly outside’. Under Liang Ji’s influence, the nei sheng–wai wang formula became a framework, within which Liang Shuming could develop his own thinking.

The advent of the Republican period in 1912 did not bring about the economic prosperity and social stability in China that most Chinese intellectuals had hoped for. Frustrated by national difficulties and his mother’s death, Liang became immersed in studying and practiced Buddhism for a time. In November 1918, Liang Ji, in the depths of despair, committed suicide by drowning himself in a lake in Beijing. The last words of the Neo-Confucian scholar revealed his anxiety about the future of China, as well as his faith in Confucian ethics (Alitto, 1979). Liang Ji’s suicide further strengthened Liang Shuming’s attachment to Confucianism. Liang Shuming understood his father’s life journey was a reflection of a moral principle in Confucianism: “scholar-apprentices (shi 士) should never be ashamed of their unrefined clothing and coarse food. Instead, they should be ashamed of their incompetence in bringing a happy life to
common people” (Liang, 1989, vol. 2, p. 664). Inspired by the spirit of Liang Ji’s sacrifice for his Confucian belief, Liang Shuming dedicated himself to exploring a pathway through which he could achieve national salvation through the rejuvenation of the Confucian tradition (Liang, 1989).

2.1 Liang Shuming’s Defense of Confucianism during the May Fourth Period

One of the most significant themes embraced by the May Fourth/New Culture Movement was to re-evaluate the role of Confucianism in Chinese society. From the perspective of Chinese iconoclasts of the May Fourth era, Confucianism became an obstruction that prevented China from transforming itself into a modern state. In their critiques, traditional bonds of the family system, predicated on Confucian/Neo-Confucian morality and virtue, had psychologically poisoned Chinese people.

Perhaps the most famous iconoclast was Lu Xun (鲁迅 1881–1936), who in 1918 published his short fiction, ‘The Diary of a Madman.’ In the story, Lu Xun presented the diary entries written by a fictitious madman (in a first person narrative), who wanted to cure his paranoia through reading classical Confucian canons (Grieder, 1983). Satirically, while reviewing the books, the madman found nothing except the Chinese characters “Eat People” displayed between the lines of the texts in the classical writings (Grieder, 1983). Here, the word “Eat People” hinted at the fact that Confucian ethics was devouring the spirit of Chinese people.

In the meantime, some influential scholars treated Confucian legacy as a foe to the spreading of modern democratic ideas. For instance, Chen Duxiu (陈独秀 1879–1942), a professor from National Peking University, declared that Confucianism had been in complete contradiction to modern civilization. Chen (1984) asserted: “The essence of Confucian ‘Three Cardinal Bonds’ is a class system.” (p. 317). He further stated: “If we want to embrace democracy, we definitely need to oppose Confucianism and its other sociopolitical derivatives, including Confucian ritualism, the cult of women's purity, traditional ethics and politics.” (p. 317). Clearly, the Confucian tradition, from Chen’s perspective ran directly counter to modern democracy.

Influenced by the idea of democracy and science, National Peking University, under the leadership of Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培 1868–1940), abolished most of the Confucian classical learnings in its curricula. For the majority of modern Chinese intellectuals, Confucianism was treated as a degenerate element in Chinese history that should be abandoned in the modern period. They believed that the yoking of the cultural stock of Confucianism to millions of Chinese people placed obstacles in the way of actualizing the modernization
of China. Overall, the May Fourth/New Culture Movement undermined the
dominance of Confucianism in Chinese culture and thought.

However, even though Confucianism had indeed lost its gloss among the
Chinese intellectual community during the early Republican period, its influ-
ence in Chinese history never completely vanished. The May Fourth period
provided scholars of New Confucianism\(^1\) with an unparalleled opportunity to
reform Confucianism (He, 1988). Unlike those scholars attempting to upgrade
Confucianism into a national religion, New Confucian scholars opposed any
endeavors to politicize Confucianism in modern times. As one of the founders
of the school of New Confucianism, Liang Shuming thought that liberal intel-
lectuals’ critiques of Confucianism were unnecessarily harsh. Under the influ-
ence of Confucianism, the Chinese nation had avoided developing a religious
tyranny over scholarly thought unlike European countries of the medieval
period (Liang, 1989). Unfortunately, since the Song dynasty, with the transfor-
mation of the philosophical school into an official ideological dogma (li xue
理学), the sense of joy in life and dynamic thought had completely vanished
from Confucianism (Liang, 1989). Thus, the dogmatized Confucian value sys-
tem merely became ‘a spiritual opium’ used by emperors of dynasties past to
poison the minds of Chinese people (Liang, 1989). In response to Confucius’
critics of the May Fourth time, Liang (1989) concluded:

...What Confucius’s critics want to attack is “Three Cardinal Bonds and
Five Ethical Webs (san gang wu chang 三纲五常).” They regarded these
things as the essence of Confucianism. In fact, all of them (Three Cardi-
nal Bonds and Five Ethics) have nothing to do with the truth of Confu-
cianism... (vol. 7, p. 770).

Accordingly, Liang (1989) pointed out that it is unfair that Chinese people
ascribed all of China's failures since the late nineteenth century to Confucianism.
To search for the truth in Confucianism should be the most urgent task for
modern Chinese intellectuals (Liang, 2004). As a result, Liang Shuming did not

\(^1\) New Confucianism (新儒家) is an intellectual movement of Confucianism initiated in the
early 20th century in Republican China, and further developed in post-Mao era contempo-
rary China. It has been greatly influenced by the neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming
dynasties. New Confucianism aims to synthesize Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. It
also emphasizes the significance of the introduction of Western philosophy to Confucian
scholarship. The first generation of New Confucians (1912–1949) consisted of Xiong Shili (熊
十力 1885–1968), Liang Shuming (梁漱溟 1893–1988), Ma Yifu (马一浮 1883–1967), Feng
Youlan (冯友兰 1895–1990), and Qian Mu (钱穆 1895–1990).
think of Confucianism as a cultural liability in Chinese history. Quite the contrary, he set himself the task of exploring the cultural assets of Confucianism, which could be applied to modern society.

Views of cultural conservatives also diverged significantly from liberal intellectuals in terms of scientism. As one of the most powerful ideas from the West, the thought of scientific empiricism shook the Chinese intellectual community to its core at the turn of the century. In particular, since the early Republican period, the erosion in the legitimacy of Confucianism opened a pathway for increasing popularity of science in Chinese society (He, 1990). From the perspectives of modern Chinese intellectuals of the May Fourth period, science went far beyond the realm of a system of foreign knowledge based mostly on verifiable hypotheses. In their view, science could be a miracle cure to all the ills afflicting China (Grieder, 1983).

This pro-scientism view was forcefully advocated by Ding Wenjiang (1887–1936), a well-known geologist of the May Fourth era. Ding (1997) argued:

Scientific method has been adopted by scientists to achieve remarkable accomplishments in the natural world. Therefore, we can expand the method to other fields in the human world. We need to treat science as a religious beacon, which can award us an honest mind and an instrument for exploring the truth of the world, as well as a strong will and the skills to illuminate human virtue (p. 181).

Ding’s conviction about scientism was echoed by most of the liberal Chinese intellectuals of the May Fourth time, with some of them even taking a scientific approach to reorganizing Chinese tradition, including classical Confucian canons. To pro-scientism Chinese scholars, all Chinese classical learning was dead knowledge, the value of which could be scientifically categorized or dismissed as a ‘historical fossil’ (Mao, 1919).

Not surprisingly, the modern Chinese intellectuals’ zeal for scientism provoked counterattacks from the cultural conservatives. For example, while visiting Europe in 1919 after WWI, the Master Liang Qichao (梁启超 1873–1929) was shocked by a distressing scene of material impoverishment and spiritual decadence there. In Liang’s argument, Europeans’ worship of scientism led to a disregard of human spiritual life, inspiring the relentless pursuit of wealth and power that ended in the catastrophe of the Great War (Grieder, 1983).

Liang Qichao’s argument was strongly bolstered by his followers, including Zhang Junmai (张君劢 1887–1969), an influential philosopher and political figure who proclaimed that no matter how developed science is, it could never
solve the problems of the philosophy of life, which depend completely on humans themselves. Another well-known philosopher, Zhang Dongsun (张东荪 1886–1973), elaborated that although the scientific method is analytical and controlled by the laws of reason, its usefulness is limited to improving our understanding of relationships that can be viewed objectively (Grieder, 1983). In general, most of the Chinese cultural conservatives argued against Ding Wenjiang, as they simultaneously endeavored to defend Confucian tradition against attacks by Chinese iconoclasts. This standpoint of cultural traditionalism was most eloquently explicated in Liang Shuming’s works during the May Fourth/ New Culture Movement period.

3 Liang Shuming’s The Cultures of East and West and Their Philosophies

To defend Confucianism against the May Fourth Chinese iconoclasts’ attacks, Liang Shuming published his famous book entitled *The Cultures of East and West and Their Philosophies* in 1922. In this book, Liang attempted to examine the unique value of traditional Chinese culture in the context of world civilization. Liang (2012) defined culture as a ‘way of life,’ and life as the relationship between the individual and his/her environment. In Liang’s terms, culture has been shaped by will. Following this statement, Liang (2012) categorized world civilization into three types: Western culture, Chinese culture, and Indian culture. Western culture, in Liang Shuming’s mind, was the prototype of the first stage of the evolution of world civilization (Liang, 2012). The cultural system was derived from basic needs and the material requirements of human survival. The ‘will’ of this culture is to look forward to seeking the pleasure of satisfaction, emphasizing reason, utility, scientific knowledge and the conquest of nature, and a life of ceaseless struggle (Liang, 2012).

In contrast with Western culture, Liang argued that Chinese culture represents the second stage, which takes the middle path. It accommodates the relationship between humans and the environment in its view (Liang, 2012). This cultural type was based on the will’s self-adjustment, self-sufficiency, and the cultivation of inner peace. By maintaining a balance between their desires and the environment, the Chinese people could achieve great spiritual happiness while enduring material poverty (Liang, 2012). The third stage of cultural development is represented by Indian culture. Within this culture, the will of the people was to turn backward for ultimate enlightenment. Liang (2012) pointed out that Indian people believe that the world is an illusion. Therefore, both self-denial and austerity play an important part in their religious practice.
After a comparative analysis, Liang characterized Chinese culture as a premature culture. Before developing the first stage of allowing the pursuit of material well-being and rationality, China had already fallen back on the second stage of having the will to be in equilibrium with nature. For the cause of national salvation, China should avoid taking the path of India, but instead borrow the idea of democracy and science from the west.

More to the point, when comparing Western culture with Chinese culture, the Neo-Confucian formula nei sheng – wai wang penetrated Liang’s thinking. Alongside the idea of Neo-Confucianism, Liang’s work displayed an intention of dividing a person’s life into outer and inner spheres. Liang considered that in Western culture, intellectual calculation in taming the outer world led to the development of science; and, individual self-interest and desire for one’s rights resulted in democracy (Allito, 1979). Liang’s writings implied that all accomplishments in the West belonged to the category of ‘being kingly outside’ (wai wang).

In contrast, Liang argued that Chinese culture, which was mostly based on Confucianism, attached importance to the inner workings of the mind (Grieder, 1970). Moral and spiritual cultivation became the main theme running through a person’s life so that the life goal was to pursue a spirit of happiness and tranquility instead of outer material achievement (Liang, 2012). Through practicing music and ritual, a Confucian individual could develop the character of benevolence (ren), and this was the foundation of all happiness (Liang, 2012). In this sense, Liang (2012) believed that although Chinese culture did not create democracy and science as the West did, Confucian life was morally superior to the deplorable Western obsession with material progress. In light of the perceived spiritual destruction of Western civilization since WWI, Liang thought only Confucianism could lay claim to becoming the teacher of the West. He made confident predictions in The Cultures of East and West and Their Philosophies:

Confucius wholeheartedly focused upon the emotional aspect of humanity... The difference between Confucius and Westerners and their basic point of conflict lies precisely in this! Westerners never paid attention to this in the past. Now, they should start sidling up to the school of Confucianism. Therefore, I will not doubt that Westerners will take the path prescribed by Confucius (2012, p. 184).

Liang’s writing demonstrates his cultural pride in Confucianism. The Cultures of East and West and Their Philosophies laid a solid foundation for the
development of his New Confucian philosophy. In this work, Liang emphasized the revival of Confucianism and its crucial role in empowering China for the future. At the same time, Liang (1989) wisely realized that the reconstruction of Confucianism in a modern period demanded some fresh thoughts and ideas from the Western world. Thus, the New Confucian scholar was devoted to opening a pathway for Confucianism to connect with Western cultures (Liang, 1989).

4 Intellectual Connections among Liang, Bergson, and Dewey

During the May Fourth period, as foreign ideas competed and interacted with each other in China, both new and conservative intellectuals were in search of new cultural stocks to enrich their own thoughts. Through intensively studying the schools of Western philosophy, Liang Shuming eventually found useful cultural assets from the philosophy of Henri Bergson (1859–1941). Bergson's philosophy emphasized the importance of intuition in human life, and criticized the belief of the supremacy of scientism (Dewey, 2004). The essential concept of Bergson's work is a vital impetus, which aimed to explain evolution in a dynamic way. In connection with vitalism, Bergson created the term ‘duration’ as an entirely qualitative multiplicity, an absolute heterogeneity of element, which comes to melt into one another (Dewey, 2004). As one of the most influential Western thinkers, Bergson emphasized the permanent flowing of free will and vital force in the world, as opposed to the worship of scientism. This philosophical approach was widely accepted by the conservative Chinese intellectuals of the May Fourth period. In particular, the idea of Bergson's vitalism struck a deep chord with Liang Shuming who stated that:

Henri Bergson strongly criticized any fixed and measurable idea from the supremacy of scientism. He believed that metaphysical philosophy requires a soft and flowing idea, which was opposed to the thought of scientism. His philosophy opened a pathway for the development of the Chinese style of thought... (2012, p. 127).

Liang argued that Bergson, through his vitalism, had tried to reach the same end point as Confucius. As Liang (2012) affirmed: “Only the spiritual life embraced by Confucius, which played a somewhat religious role in Chinese people’s lives, can match the Western School of Vitalism.” (p. 164). In *The Cultures of East and West and Their Philosophies*, Liang (2012) also held that Confucius’s ideas, to a large extent, embodied vitalism.
Consequently, Liang connected Bergson’s thinking with Confucian philosophy. For Liang, Confucius –like Bergson– understood life as a continuous flow during which only intuition can appear (Alitto, 1979). That was why Confucian scholars always followed an intuition to live a life that rejected calculation and rationality (Liang, 2012). For instance, while gaining insight into Mencius’s ideas, Liang introduced the idea of intuition from Bergson into the realm of Confucian moral education. He wrote:

Everyone has an intuition and instinct to pursue goodness. Therefore, Mencius said: ‘All people have a heart which cannot stand to see the suffering of others... Why do I say all human beings have a heart which cannot stand to see the suffering of others? If an infant were about to fall into a well, anyone would be upset and concerned. This concern would not be due to the fact that the person wanted to get on good terms with the baby’s parents, or because he wanted to improve his reputation among the community or among his friends. Nor would it be because he was afraid of the criticism that might result from a show of non-concern (p. 134).

Based on his analysis, Liang Shuming (2012) affirmed that the core ethical idea of Confucianism, the character of ren (仁), is in fact derived from human intuition. In his explanation, ren is an inner state of being, peaceful yet full of vitality. Following this conviction, Liang (2012) concluded that: “the thought of Confucianism completely follows intuition. The most important mission that Confucian scholars want to achieve is to sharpen their intuition... Consequently, Confucius encouraged people to pursue ‘ren’ ”(p. 137).

In sum, Liang Shuming was able to infuse Confucianism with the spirit of modernity during the May Fourth period by invoking Henri Bergson’s vitalism. By “vitalizing” Confucianism, Liang transformed this classical philosophical system from a “dead” ideology into a spirited philosophy of life. In the meantime, Liang was looking forward to finding common ground among the ideas of Bergson, Dewey, and Confucius. To achieve this, the first important step for Liang Shuming was to explore an intellectual bond between Bergson and Dewey. As Liang (1989) stated:

Although Bergson does not share the same school with William James and John Dewey, his vitalism has contributed to the development of the two thinkers’ philosophies. Both thinkers have been affected by the theory of biology, which underpins their theories. If one reads over Dewey’s works, one will find out where the philosophical root of the American educator’s thought is located, and what logic he has adopted to create such a theory (vol. 2, p. 126).
From Liang's perspective, Bergson's vitalism formed a foundation on which he could approach John Dewey's pragmatism. Furthermore, Liang stressed that there was a strong philosophical bond between his own ideas and the thoughts of Dewey and Bergson. He pointed out:

There is a continuity between my thought and Dewey's idea. Dewey's theory is based on the field of biology. Likewise, Bergson's thought has a tremendous impact on my thinking. Bergson is a biologist. When elaborating on his own thought, Dewey repeatedly talks about "life" (sheng ming 生命). Although Dewey's theory is rooted in biology, his idea is not a result of studying biology. What he studies is indeed education... he has really done a great job on studying education! (1989, vol. 7, p. 686)

It is fair to say that Bergson's vitalism formed a platform for a philosophical dialogue between the "last Confucian" and the "American Confucian". Influenced by Bergson's ideas, Liang's understanding of Dewey's educational philosophy is compatible with his interpretation of Confucianism. When discussing Confucian philosophy, Liang (1989) recapitulated:

...In Confucianism the universe is the sum of all living beings. The main thread from biological development to evolutorial history of human society is a relentless creation of 'big' life (sheng ming). All living things are supposed to be the embodiment of this 'big' life (sheng ming) (vol. 2, p. 94).

It is not surprising that Liang's writing used a similar tone to explicate the essence of Dewey's educational thought. According to Liang (1989):

From the standpoint of Dewey's educational philosophy, the universe is a "big" life (sheng ming). An understanding of the universe demands an understanding of life (sheng ming). Although life (sheng ming) is everywhere, the core of the big life (sheng ming) of the universe is a human being. This life (sheng ming) is full of vitality, and the most vital thing in the universe is people's heart. For Dewey, if we can soundly perceive people's heart, we can understand the meaning of life (sheng ming) in the universe (vol. 7, p. 686).

Here, Liang views "perceiving people's heart" as a prerequisite to "understanding the meaning of life in the universe". That is to say, education shall start with the "purification of people's heart" (zheng ren xin 正人心). This way of interpreting Dewey's educational philosophy was in agreement with
a Neo-Confucian formula of ‘being a sage inside’ (nei sheng) and ‘being king-
ly outside’ (wai wang). Following this mode of thinking, the New Confucian
scholar (1989) believed that Dewey's educational philosophy offered insight
into the cultivation of “inner growth first”, and then made a strong connection
between the individual and society.

In view of these convictions, Liang Shuming encouraged readers to use a
unique way to study Dewey's Democracy and Education. Compared with oth-
er chapters in the book, Liang preferred to read chapter four (“Education as
Growth”) first. He explained:

Chapter four paid more attention to individual life. It would be better for
us to read this chapter in advance while studying the book so that we can
have an understanding of the essence of individual life. This is the foun-

Obviously, Bergson's vitalism had a strong influence on Liang's interpretation
of Dewey's work. After discussing the significance of chapter four, Liang be-
lieved that it would be beneficial for readers to then review chapters one, two
and three. In these chapters, Liang stated that Dewey aimed to explore the
connection between individual life and social life. The focus of chapter seven
considers how education can develop social life. Liang pointed out that this
chapter should become the final section that readers need to study.

Liang interpreted vitalism as the main theme pervading all chapters of
Dewey's Democracy and Education. Just as he had done to Confucianism, Li-
ang also “vitalized” Dewey's educational philosophy. More meaningfully, based
on the notion of vitalism, Liang eventually yoked his Confucian thought to
Dewey's pragmatism. He argued:

...what his [Dewey’s] book explored is a word huo (change 活). He com-
pletely understood that life is about change... what he discussed is not an
innovative thing. Instead, it is supposed to stay where it should stay. In
his opinion, life should follow its own way; the only thing we can do is to
exactly grasp the essence of life. This notion is the same as Confucianism

It is clear that a basic assumption of Liang's understanding of Dewey's educa-
tional philosophy is aligned with his New Confucian way of thinking. In the fol-
lowing sections, I seek to uncover how Liang synthesized Confucian education
with Deweyan learning in pursuit of his rural educational reform.
5 Liang Shuming’s Reflection on Chinese Education

After completing the final chapters of The Cultures of East and West and Their Philosophies, Liang Shuming focused on how to implement his cultural theory in the Chinese reality. He considered:

The philosophy of life of Confucius and Yan Hui (one of Confucius’ favorite students) can resolve those problems of life anguishing Chinese young people, and eventually open a right pathway for them... Only the restoration of Chinese [Confucian] philosophy of life can revive Chinese people's force of vitality, which is disappearing and fading. A real vital force should come from the Chinese inner spirit... Since the May Fourth Movement, some scholars regard the New Culture Movement as the renaissance of Chinese civilization. In fact, this movement is only a result of the rise of Western culture in China... The renaissance of Chinese civilization should be based on the restoration of their own philosophy of life... (2012, p. 229).

Evidently, for Liang, the revival of Confucianism became a key factor in reconstructing Chinese people's spirit and morality. Inspired by such an ideal, Liang resigned his faculty job at National Beijing University in 1924. From 1924 to 1936, he experimented with his educational and cultural philosophy in rural counties in Henan and Shandong provinces. The most extraordinary accomplishment in his rural reconstruction was represented by his efforts in Zhouping county of Shandong province where Liang paid considerable attention to rural educational reform. Unfortunately, in 1937 when he began promoting his work in Zhouping, the second Sino-Japanese war erupted. As the Japanese army took over Shandong province in the following year, Liang's rural reconstruction movement came to a reluctant end.

A combination of specific factors shaped Liang Shuming's educational ideas about rural reconstruction. First, Liang felt very disappointed in the modern educational system in China, which was blindly modeled on the Western style. Development of the modern school system in China was a result of the imitation of a foreign style of education from the late Qing. During the period of the May Fourth movement, Chinese educators increasingly believed that the development of a new education system based on the Western model would be a good way to spread the ideal of democracy and science among Chinese youth. John Dewey’s arrival triggered Chinese educators’ enthusiasm to introduce an American-style school system. Even though Western-oriented Chinese
educators made great progress in the modernization of Chinese education, some wise scholars still spoke out harshly about the new school system. Liang Shuming was one of them. He remarked:

...Current school education only taught students some knowledge and skills at the expense of all things of their lives... how can the formal school system help students understand their lives if our education only focuses on regular hour curriculum and subject materials? It is not correct for educators to only emphasize the importance of the acquisition of “knowledge”, ignoring students’ mental and physical growth... In my view, education should aim to lead students to view all aspects of their lives, then help them take a correct pathway... the building up of both spiritual mind and lively body are essential to education (1989, vol. 4, p. 778).

Liang conceptualized education very broadly, embracing all items of a cultural inventory in human society. Following such a notion, he proceeded to elaborate on his educational philosophy based on the cultural perspective stemming from his work, The Cultures of East and West and Their Philosophies. Liang (1989) argued that the West and China formed their own respective educational ideals. Western education emphasizes the significance of the development of human intelligence, whereas Chinese or Confucian education pays considerable attention to the cultivation of human emotion and character. While the former aims for the acquisition of knowledge, the latter directs students to focus on the lives of human beings (Liang, 1989).

Liang Shuming’s understanding of the uniqueness of Chinese society also contributed to the formation of his educational ideas. In Liang’s view, an agricultural country like China could not cope adequately with the new education. He argued:

...In fact, the current school system is not in sync with our social reality... within the new school system or modern society, our students easily develop an urban way of life. In cities, they are totally alienated from the lifestyle and interest of the masses. Through new education, they only study some subjects (such as English and Mathematics) that are unrelated to their real lives. They don’t have the opportunity to acquire any basic knowledge of rural life... they don’t know how to deal with farm labor... all the things that they learn through the new education are remote from their actual lives... the purpose of the new education only serves

In Liang's revelation, the Westernized educational system had failed to modernize the state by discarding all that was of value in traditional Chinese education. As new education spread, Chinese society deteriorated further.

Liang's prescription for Chinese education was compatible with his thoughts of New Confucianism. In his eyes, Chinese culture was deeply rooted in rural domains (rather than urban enclaves) and the fundamental difficulties were caused by the problem of cultural disorder within these regions (Liang, 1989). Consequently, the rise of China would rely heavily on the revival of Confucianism in rural areas. In addition, Liang's educational ideas corresponded with the logical Confucian pathway from 'being sage inside' (nei sheng) to 'being kingly outside' (wai wang). As he wrote:

> Education aims to improve human creativity. It once paid considerable attention to the spiritual maturation of innumerable living individuals. For them, the mission of education is to pursue inner growth. External achievements were merely the embodiment of their moral development (1989, vol. 2, p. 94).

Apparently, Liang treated the 'purification of people's heart' as a foundation for achieving educational goals. In pursuit of such a New Confucian ideal, Liang made great efforts to engage in spiritual and moral reconstruction during the period of rural reconstruction.

6 Liang Shuming's Synthesis of Confucianism and Deweyan Pragmatism in Rural Educational Practice

One of Liang's famous reform endeavors was to revitalize the custom of academic lectures (jiang xue 讲学), which were used by Confucian scholars during the Song and Ming dynasty. The ultimate model for classical academic lectures was based on the relationship between Confucius and Mencius and their disciples. Generally speaking, this educational model combined moral and intellectual cultivation with mutual interaction, encouragement, and criticism in an intimate student-teacher setting. More importantly, in Liang's view, jiang xue became an excellent way to realize Confucius's philosophy of life in his rural reconstruction. Through the acquisition of the spirit behind Confucian ritual
and music, each villager was supposed to develop the character of ren, which was derived from Liang’s term ‘human intuition,’ and educated to become an exemplary person.

In reference to the classical educational model, Liang wanted to restore a Confucian human relationship among the masses in rural areas. Liang’s New Confucian thought became an inner logic throughout his educational ideals toward rural reconstruction. The focal point of his rural educational reformation was to retain the superiority of Confucian civilization in the face of serious cultural and ideological challenges from the West. Focusing on the historical and cultural context is important for understanding Liang’s absorption of John Dewey’s educational philosophy.

Liang Shuming’s application of Dewey’s educational philosophy together with his application of Confucianism to rural reality, served his purpose of Chinese rural reconstruction. In his critiques of the modern educational system of the Republican period, Liang Shuming regarded Dewey’s educational thought as a cultural asset to enrich his own discourse on the rural reconstruction movement. For instance, to justify his reflection on Western culture, Liang (1989) referenced some ideas from Dewey’s Democracy and Education:

As Dewey thought, although today’s [Western] society is in (a) great progress (ion), it is still encumbered by a large number of drawbacks. For many people, their relationships have been becoming more and more mechanical. For example, there is no communication between workers and capitalists... Although they reside in the same society, there are insufficient social interactions among them. If there was a society, where all people share a common value and organize themselves with the ability of reasoning, this society would be the most advanced and ideal... (vol. 7, p. 694).

From the New Confucians’ stance of anti-scientism, Dewey’s attack on Western urban society greatly resonated with Liang Shuming. Dewey’s educational idea also left a deep mark on Liang’s ideas about rural educational reformation. While engaging in reforming rural society, Liang frequently highlighted the concept of growth in his explanation of the implication of his rural reconstruction movement. He stated:

...the goal of our rural reconstruction is to establish a social institution. I frequently treat this social institution as a growth... It gradually develops from the bud; it starts from a tiny thing... It will grow up from a rural area, then develop and spread to big society (1989, vol. 2, p. 337).
In this short paragraph, the logical pathway from individual growth to social development somewhat mirrored the influence of Dewey’s idea of ‘Education as Growth’ in Liang’s view. Moreover, Dewey’s view of balancing school education with social education in *Democracy and Education* also contributed to Liang Shuming’s rural educational philosophy. In *Foundational Ideas of John Dewey’s Educational Philosophy*, Liang disclosed that in Dewey’s educational thinking, school education and social education are complementary. Liang (1989) argued:

According to Dewey, social education can correct the disadvantages of school education. The most important thing is to find an equilibrium between the two styles of education... it is necessary to transform today’s school into a mini-community, establish a continuity between the life of school and society, and get rid of certain artificial parts of current school life irrelevant to social reality... (vol. 7, p. 696).

More meaningfully, as a follower of Confucius, Liang (1989) acutely realized that for both Dewey and Confucius, societal life and human education are in interplay. Consequently, when stating the idea of social education in Dewey’s philosophy, Liang’s writing (1989) simultaneously presented an example of Confucius’s attempts to create ancient private schools, by breaking up the royal court’s monopoly over mass education.

In keeping with Dewey’s ideas, Liang attempted to foster intimacy between the school education and villagers’ social life by establishing the Peasant School (*xiang nong xue xiao* 乡农学校) during the 1930s. The school was expected to play both roles of educational and social institution in the Chinese rural domain (Liang, 1989). To achieve this goal, the curriculum in the school encompassed the diversity of educational programs, including literacy education, mathematics, music, medical care, professional training, and character and civic education. Students were simultaneously taught to learn the basic three R skills (reading, writing, and arithmetic), as well as some knowledge of modern agricultural science and technology (Ma, 1992). After school they were strongly encouraged to develop a sense of cooperation and autonomy through participating in a variety of farming activities (Ma, 1992).

The Peasant School was the embodiment of Liang’s Confucian idealism. For Liang Shuming, the development of the character of *nei sheng* was the most important thing in Chinese rural education. Liang emphasized the leadership of the school should be comprised of a group of exemplary Confucian people who are held in high prestige in the village for their morality. Following the custom of academic lectures (*jiang xue*), the teachers serving the school were also supposed to become role models for the students (Liang, 2012).
Correspondingly, moral cultivation played a crucial role in the students’ educational life. For instance, the idea of ‘the rural compact’ (xiang yue 乡约) was adopted by the Peasant School to educate the students. Briefly speaking, xiang yue, which originated from the Song dynasty (960–1279), embraces social and educational functions in Chinese history. It was revived at the beginning of the Qing in the mid-seventeenth century for the edification of a wider audience than could be reached by ill-attended and irregular lectures at the school temples (Bothwick, 1983). Local officials appointed scholars to expound the maxims of the emperor at public lectures. The core of the Xiang Yue was to inculcate Confucian value among Chinese people (Bothwick, 1983).

After removal of an officially dogmatic aspect of the rural compact, Liang endeavored to retain the component of moral teaching and cultural transmission in the model. In the school community, Confucian ritual became an important guide to regulate student behavior instead of law. At the same time, students were required to practice a mutual exhortation of moral cultivation, together with developing an interdependent relationship to get through any hardship (Ma, 1992).

Liang planned to have the model of the peasant school spread from the village to provincial level, eventually forming one great nationwide social-educational-cultural system. Within a Confucian atmosphere, millions of exemplary persons were expected to develop out of the system. He believed that once rural reconstruction had built up its strength, a utopian Confucian society would eventually replace government (Alitto, 1979). Liang Shuming’s experiment with the Peasant School was a reflection of his synthesis of the educational thoughts of John Dewey and Confucianism in the rural reconstruction movement.

7 Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the effects of Confucian tradition and John Dewey’s pragmatism on Chinese rural educational reform by studying Liang Shuming’s intellectual development and his educational practice. Before approaching Dewey’s philosophy, Liang had already developed his system of thought using the framework of nei sheng–wai wang. This Confucian formula drove Liang to undertake surveys of Western, Chinese, and Indian cultures. After investigating the uniqueness of Chinese civilization, Liang’s book, The Cultures of East and West and Their Philosophies, highlighted his stance of cultural nationalism. During the May Fourth / New Culture period, Liang’s nurturing of a sense of cultural superiority stemming from Confucianism shaped his vision of Deweyan education.
Overall, Liang (1989) portrayed Dewey’s educational thought as a cultural asset, which could be instrumental in bringing about rural educational reform. Liang took a very positive view of Dewey’s educational idea. He even announced: “I will stand by Dewey to resist the trend toward anti-humanity in contemporary Western philosophy...” (1989, vol. 7, p. 688). However, after reviewing Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*, Liang found that there were still obvious limitations to Dewey’s educational philosophy. He pointed out that:

...he [Dewey] only understands the changing side of life. He does not perceive the unchanging part of life. The unchanging part is the substance (*ti* 体) of changing part, and changing part is the function (*yong* 用) of unchanging part. He only understands the “*yong*” of life. Instead, he does not understand the “*ti*” of life... what he studies is about everything outside life itself. He cannot understand the essence of life... All things he said are quite moral but he has not discovered the truth of morality. His idea is close to Confucianism, however, he missed the most important part of it (1989, vol. 7, p. 701).

This final statement was a reflection of the influence of the Confucian *ti-yong* formula on Liang’s mind. Alongside such a formula, Liang implied that Dewey’s educational thought should belong to the realm of *yong* (function), which can only serve as a complement for Confucianism. On the contrary, Confucianism was believed to be a *ti* (substance), which became a cultural and moral foundation for Chinese people’s living. Thus, Liang (1989) maintains Dewey guided people only towards applying intelligence in dealing with the practicalities of life, instead of reflecting inwardly upon the value of life. Liang (1989) thought that even though Dewey took a very critical view of Western society, the American educator failed to find a real solution to cure Western social ills because his philosophy was mostly rooted in Western civilization. Liang exhibited great self-confidence in helping Dewey through his theoretical dilemma. He declared: “...Dewey needs our assistance from the East. If I have surplus energy, I will help him out” (1989, vol. 7, 688). Liang’s statement strongly emphasized his motivation to correct the deficiencies of Dewey’s educational philosophy by means of Confucian philosophy. Liang’s application of Dewey’s educational thought had been fashioned by his stance as a cultural nationalist. In other words, the sources that Liang relied on in his reception of Dewey’s idea derived from his New Confucian thought in *The Cultures of East and West and Their Philosophies*.

Liang Shuming’s educational thought and practice during 1920–1930 denote a fascinating philosophical dialogue between Confucianism and John Dewey’s pragmatism. This fruitful dialogue mirrors the cultural vision in Jane Roland...
Martin’s Educational Theory as Encounter. As Martin (2011) points out in Education Reconfigured: Culture, Encounter, and Change, cultural stock can attach to individual capacities in a variety of ways that fall along a continuum from dead relic to living legacy. She further notes: “Depending on the individuals, the coupling and uncoupling of stock and capacities can lead to that stock or other items of stock being reinterpreted, refigured, reconstructed, or even rejected” (p. 23). When Liang yoked himself to the cultural stock of China and the West, both Confucianism and Dewey’s philosophy experienced a reinterpretation and reconstruction in his educational practice.

References


