

Review

## May Fourth: Historical misunderstanding?

Alberto Castelli

Xiamen University, Xiamen, China.

Received 07 May, 2015 Accepted 9 June, 2015

While China is looking up at the Western scientific achievements, seeing in it the way through independence, the European intelligentsia to the pretentious positivist understanding of the world answered declaring the bankrupt of the Western civilization. It is true that the technological progress of the last century surpassed the achievements of three thousand years prior this period, but science brought catastrophes. Cities and souls in ruins are what remain of the scientific revolution. However the May Fourth movement seems not to be aware of the European collapse as to say that their understanding of the Western civilization is based on an historical misunderstanding. One therefore wonders whether we would have had May Fourth without such a misunderstanding. If China had known that Europe itself did not believe anymore in her historical background, would China have brandished it anyway as example of a new era?

**Key words:** May Fourth Movement, positivism, modernism, iconoclasm, crisis of reason

### INTRODUCTION

Darwin's theory of evolution and Herbert Spencer Study of Sociology play a big role in the definition of what May Fourth really is. The survival of the fittest governed biological and social evolution, species and society evolved from homogeneous to heterogeneous leading to a state of increasing individualization. This is the message that China received from Europe while engaged in a cultural struggle for independence: it was a Chinese understanding that the failure of Chinese to grasp the mechanism of evolution led directly to the lack of progress in China and therefore they wondered whether they will survive in this struggle or they were going to be eliminated throughout the process of human selection. As the Manifesto of all students in Beijing goes:

*"The loss of Shantung means the destruction of the integrity of Chinese territory. Once the integrity of her*

*territory is destroyed, China will soon be annihilated (...) China's territory might be conquered, but it cannot be given away, Chinese people might be massacred but they will not surrender. Our country is about to be annihilated."* (Chow, 1978).

The government seemed weak, on one hand trying to redefine China's position in the world economy; one the other hand, confronting the raising of a population whose rights of self-determination had just been ignored. Science seemed to be the future, the new myth evocated to get access to a new era of prosperity and welfare; science was pushed forward as the key to modernity. Unfortunately on the other side of the hemisphere, things were going quite differently. In the early attack on Confucianism and Chinese civilization, in the process of acquiring Western learning there is an aspect that must

E-mail: [lamezzapunta@tiscali.it](mailto:lamezzapunta@tiscali.it)

Authors agree that this article remain permanently open access under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

be carefully considered. Shortly after WWI the European assumption regarding the omnipotence of science was overturned. Physics (Heisenberg, Gödel), philosophy (Nietzsche, Simmel), literature (Mann, Musil, Pirandello, Joyce, Woolf) and art (Munch) all were seized by the same pessimism, that science could not explain human life, that men had become slaves of their machine, that there was no man (Foucault), no art (Adorno) and no god left (Nietzsche) (Lowith, 2000; Simmel, 1968, 1990). However the May Fourth movement seemed not to be aware of the European collapse as to say that their understanding of the Western civilization is based on an historical misunderstanding. If China had known that Europe itself did not believe anymore in her historical background, would China have brandished it anyway as an example of a new era? To answer this question, we shall first discuss the European background when simultaneously the New Movement took place in China. We will have a brief glance at the philosophical stage Europe found itself at the beginning of the twentieth century. Afterwards we will analyze closely the historical background that led to one of the deepest crises of the Western civilization. Finally we will go back to the Chinese contest trying to give answers that history itself ignores.

#### May Fourth: Between iconoclasm and conservatism

After the Shantung issue following the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 and the Twenty-one demands of Japan, Chinese intellectuals and not, obviously harbored resentment against the Great Western Powers. But the Chinese Nationalism, the wounded patriotism of a whole country, was a feeling concerning international politics in general rather than foreigners in particular, international politics and western cultural influences were spheres well distinguished. In fact it must be said that especially after WWI many western intellectuals were invited and welcomed to lecture in China. Dewey, the father of pragmatism, gave some sixteen lectures at Beijing University unfolding his main idea, knowledge as a form of doing, advocating that China could not change without a social transformation which is based on a transformation of ideas. Russell, contrary to most of Chinese intellectuals back then, advocated what China kept repeating some sixty years before, 中学为体西学为用, (Chinese learning as fundamental structure, Western learning for practical use), tools but not values, as to say that what China had to take from the western influence was not about moral and ethics but science and technical skills. Besides the fact that it is a quite disputable position for the application of science brings along a cultural, philosophical universe of understanding, the experience of Dewey and Russell proved to a certain degree that May Fourth was a pro-western movement or, put it in a different way, May Fourth was an intellectual movement against China itself

rather than Western powers. China for centuries has been dominated by four schools of thought, Confucianism and Legalism often mixed together and Taoism and Buddhism often corrupted by superstition; though this is, as paradoxical as it might sound, a common outcome of religion (see Christianity in South America) when religion does not follow the path of a developing civil society. The main idea behind the origins of Chinese philosophy is that everything is ruled by *li* (reason), the western law of nature, but *li* is as well an ideal type; therefore if the actual government corresponds to the ideal type government, then it is considered good. The same goes for people, given a set of ideal qualities the secret to be a good man is to conform as much as possible to the archetype. Mencius will confront such a definition by saying that not the ruler but the people are the most important in a State and by giving them the right to revolt they stand as the greatest advocate of political democracy in Chinese history. The Legalist soon after will replay by saying that only a code of law to which everyone adheres is the key for a good government.

All in all the history of China it has been always an attempt to restore Confucianism whenever it came loose. May Fourth in this sense stands unique in the history of China because, among others significance, it is an attempt to dethrone *Confucius and his sons* but by so doing the whole China would see washed away millennia of cultural reference. For the first time Confucianism is not any more the philosophy-religion of harmony and benevolence but it turns being the ideological legitimation for centuries of exploitation. At the turn of the century Confucianism becomes the *passé-partout* of a feudal society where the individual is considered a member of the family and not an independent unit, Confucius imposed filial piety without providing individual rights, Confucius held a caste system with a distinction between superior and inferior were sovereign, father and husband stand as superior, son, wife, people obey as inferior, were women are object of a male society, and men don't possess anything until their parents die. And again Confucius was not a religion at all as Confucius refused to discuss the soul after life, so why dealing with it as if it was? What May Fourth really does is to tear apart four thousand years of traditions, family systems, old moralities, customs, and institutions. Written records witness of students who rejected their name, their family, denied their fathers, denouncing family bounds as slavery, proclaiming individual self-expression including sexual freedom. Such a violent reaction can probably only be explained by considering the cultural background, the very essence of Chinese despotic system: marriages were prearranged, women conditions were absolutely extreme in many ways, teen agers, whose fiancé died, were encouraged to die after them, all in all women were no regarded as independent citizens. Men considered unfilial if they refused to marry the girl picked by their

parents (during the Manchu dynasty we have people who buried their infant sons alive in order to save money to feed their parents, and they were honored then as filial sons according to Confucian morality). At stake there is not only the gender dynamic but the whole cultural apparatus which doesn't correspond anymore to the needs of the civil society: superstitions, divination, geomancy, magic pills for immortality, foot binding, it all had to be left behind.

Considering this socio-cultural system it is more understandable why May Fourth is the key to understand modern China, May Fourth is to some extent the dawn of Chinese modernism and we cannot but notice that when a revolution time comes, when a change is due, China is shockingly iconoclast, in a way that it tends to wash away everything from the origins. Why is that? How is it possible that China maintained the cult of ancestors for more than 3000 years but developed a xenophobic nationalism through which the old China was about to be destroyed? Of course the intrusion of the western civilization undermined the stability and the coherence of the tradition, and on the other hand influenced the intellectual direction. But China's hatred for the past it must be found in China at first, it is strictly linked to the biological, fundamentalism in some way, conservatism of China. While in the West each historical period had its own special character, China has always been concerned about enduring rather than developing and duration is synonymous of repetition. The origins of Chinese conservatism are both religious and philosophical. Because China had no god, a metaphysical element to refer to, China feared nature and felt vulnerable before it. Unlike the western counterpart, which rebelled to it by digging into its mystery and drama, China accepted nature trying to come to terms with it. It stabilized nature through a system of repetitions, be it family clans, rituals, dynasties, the everlasting lengths of the party member's mandate. Following the reasoning, repetition brought conservatism; conservatism due to its static nature led to despotism. But it is the very roots of Chinese philosophy that shapes the immobility of China: Confucianism, Taoism, the early Moism they all agree on seeing in the proliferation of diversity (different values, concept of right and wrong, enlarging of knowledge) the cause of conflict, meant as social disorder and unhappiness, meant as inequality. From here the need to keep people ignorant in an early stage for they have to believe rather than understand (Taoism), and to produce technician rather than thinker for thinkers will understand rather than believe (Communism).

China therefore was conservative and became reactionary when the empire was corrupted and when was attacked by western powers. The dynasties, May Fourth, The Cultural Revolution, are all attempts to restore a new conservatism in China more suited to modern times and capable to endure thousands of years like that of the empire. Chinese hatred of the past is therefore the

hatred of an emerging conservatism for a dying conservatism, though as much as it might sound paradoxical, Chinese Communism, that especially in the sixties dueled with the residual of Chinese Confucianism, is a continuation of the latter for the pillars they both stand on are in fact the same: social order as mirror of the cosmic order, people considered as collective rather than individual, intellectual duty of loyalty to the ruler. By so doing China succeeded on establishing a static bureaucracy, where conservatism and stagnation shaped the soul of a civilization, but of course in a certain sense such immobility placed China out of history for few centuries. Back to the movement of May Fourth, while China was attacking China, simultaneously there was a wide opening to the Western society: student going to study abroad coming back with a luggage full of new ideas, socialism, labor's rights, women's right. Feminism was actually more than a proclaim, with the first female student admitted to Beijing University in 1920, who had Lu Xun referring to a "Nora phenomenon" recalling the Ibsen's Dolls House where Nora becomes a symbol of woman emancipation all around the world. It is evident that even though Versailles had shaken China's faith in the western power, it did not shake the belief that western culture was relevant to Chinese needs.

The aim of literature itself therefore shifted from a literature conceived for morality sake (writers should write to propagate moral principle) to realism in terms of style (abandoning the classical language for the vernacular) and then in terms of content in a sense that literature became significant for humanity, unfolding daily issues. Books were translated and published and books brought new ideologies, concepts, Dewey (Pragmatism), Russell (liberalism), Bakunin (anarchism), Tolstoy (humanitarianism) Marx and Engels (scientific socialism). China was all of a sudden invaded by new art, new literature, romanticism, realism naturalism, so divergent and confusing, centuries of Western culture suddenly a-critically converged all together on the Chinese stage. Where to stand now, is the question of a generation of literati (Bei, 1986; Chu-yuan, 1990; Hualing, 1981; Charles, 1967; Lin, 1979; Liang Ch'i-Ch'ao, 1967).

### Philosophical stage

If we look closely, as much as we can to the origin of human history what emerges is the repeating of a question to whom *fides at ratio* (Faith and Reason) vainly attempt to answer: how do we explain men? Modern man was born within the Humanism<sup>1</sup>, here man steps away from God, challenging Him. Aware that salvation could have been achieved without ingratiating any divinity but

<sup>1</sup> Protagoras might be seen as the father of modern individualism: "Man is the measure of all things: of the things that are, that they are, of the things that are not, that they are not"

through the perfection of men's creation, the centuries of Humanism and Renaissance are likely to be considered the highest moment of mankind in a way that man acknowledges himself as individual and his dissolute freedom. Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am) is one of the main expression of subjectivism for it shapes every single man with reason while setting him free from chaos or any pre-arranged order. Kant will follow the same path defining knowledge as knowledge of phenomenon but phenomenon as they appear to us. *I think* is therefore the real philosophical Copernican revolution for it takes the world to spin around the subject and not the other way around: reason takes over metaphysic. Few years later the positivist materialism will deposit a new trust over the whole society, Positivism turns to be the philosophical application of science. This is a key point to understand the last two centuries of the European society and to some degrees May Fourth. Not only the technological progress is the obvious marker of men's achievement, but also man is a moment, together with others infinite moment of a process heading towards perfection. Hegel, for instance, had proudly believed to have reached the highest moment of mankind. Such optimism however was not fated to last. Already Schopenhauer had sensed the limits of the structure. Schopenhauer has lived all the illusions of the new bourgeoisie before the French revolution, and some fifty years later the very same class, now in power, turns to be a bench of corrupted merchants. It is enough to convince him regarding the immobility and tragedy of history, a blind and irrational destiny leading men's lives is what remains of the so celebrated reason, there are therefore zones overshadowed by chaos and incomprehensible will all along our existence. But it is only at the end of the Nineteenth century that a different prospective takes shape: the anthropological optimism towards men's achievements breaks. Human reason senses a reality still unknown or, better said a reality which cannot be said. It appears now as evident first an entropic gap between man and nature, then the dualistic relation between man and structure, the world outside; it is the beginning of a process of reification and alienation, where while attempting to find the fields of application of reason, human reason went slowly dissolving only to take shape again in Auschwitz.

Philosophy, as well as history, has now to re-define its own categories of thought since observing an ideal continuum from Descartes to Wittgenstein the impression is that in the attempt to define the limit or reason, reason itself collapsed and men with it, by which I mean that there are human expressions, fields of application, such as ethic, moral, values which are denied to the scientific discovery or at least are not deducible through the categories of the rational thought. The bracket 1890-1930 seems to reach a death point while suggesting that the origin of everything is placed in an irrational dimension, a

vague and opaque zone which is unreachable unless through an epiphany. To confirm this new blurred tendency towards understanding, Wittgenstein in the last pages of his *Tractatus* affirms that his work consists in two parts, the first one belongs to what he has written and the second one belongs to what he hasn't written, and this is the most important part. By so doing he is marking a clear distinction between the application of science and that of moral, between what is expressible and what is not. From now on, on a philosophical stage, western intelligentsia will be engaged in discovering new categories of thought and expression, aware that science, with mechanistic approach, had failed to decode the entanglement with reality. But for a better understanding of this passage we shall now have a look at the European historical background.

### Historical background: Positivism

The Positivist era is based on unlimited scientific optimism, as to say that the technological innovations, geographic discoveries, will bring in men's society simply the best possible life and science in this endless process of development will assume a guide role, starting and ending point of every application of knowledge. In the Nineteenth century this has been the European's most diffuse understanding and presumption, but then we have seen positivism failed, history proved it wrong: the contradiction of the industrial revolution, first and foremost the class struggle, reveals that evolution not always is synonymous of progress. The unleashing of vulgar imperialism confirms that the romantic nationalism easily turns to be a violent colonialism guilty of forgetting the liberal premises through which should have happened man's liberation. There is all in all an evident shame blowing over European consciousness for having betrayed bourgeois ideals and for having misread history. Science seems to be guilty. Because science had promised to unveil the secret of existence and now more humbly recognizes that it cannot be; science as well, castled in a kind of methodological monism, had promised that the methodology of natural science (physic, mathematic) could have been applicable to any realm of human experience, any totality could have been understood and described by the author as the scientist does with his object of study. It did not happen. It is the opening of a crisis, in terms of values, culture, consciousness, which became tragedy when the cultural elite realized that Europe was not ready to face it: old ideals were not substitute with new ones, for an old system that slowly decays there was not a new one to be replaced with. This is why the world, the intellectual world, will find itself somehow naked before the present, since the well preserved objective reality (as the positivist approach describes it, reality to be described as a fact clear and

distinct) no longer exists and on the ashes what is left is the needs for new contents (art, literature, music) which cannot be fulfilled. Men re-become object of the history as long as he doesn't understand it, philosophy gives up consolidate system until then, literature digs into a new language, sociology will try to investigate and interpret the causes behind the crisis. All in all Europe at the beginning of the Twentieth century is at loss, shaped by an unprecedented cultural crisis. With some imagination we could even find a date for its origins:

*"On or about December 1910 human nature changed...All human relation shifted- those between master and servants, husband and wives, parents and children. And when human relation change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature"*<sup>2</sup>

It is a moment of obvious confusion due to the loss of shared certainty (Nietzsche), of redefinition of values (Weber); the common understanding is a quite dramatic view of the history: *things fall apart; the center cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world*<sup>3</sup>. Artists are not able yet to look upon reality recognizing in it regularities in terms of procedures and understanding, but only as chaos (Schopenhauer). There is a common socio-cultural background linking together natural science and human science, alienated characters looking for a definition of existential space, perception of homelessness, sharing the same dramatic investigation deep into men most intimate doubt. In this historical frame, individual existences are left alone swaying dangerously between the Benjamin end of history and the Camus absurdity. Europe is at the edge of a nihilist abyss where, (the message passed by the Avant-guard) we assist to the fragmentation of man, to be seen as ideas, culture, values, past, all dissolving in the name of a not well defined structure, the future indeed. But what happen exactly to generate such a devastating crisis? Which are the historical reasons behind the most dramatic socio-cultural downfall that European consciousness has ever assisted? Clearly the War played a big role in it.

The scenario at the turn of the century is chaos. Europe pretended to dominate the world culturally and economically, between the 1890s and 1930s produced a series of developments that are well considered the foundation of Twentieth century technology. Socio-economic phenomenon such as industrialization expansion, technology revolution, urbanization, economic growth, urban growth, all swept away by the First World War. But the wave of the war washed away much more than cities and factories, it is the old order of European society that disappeared, social status, family relationship, state-religion dynamics, the very role of human being into society was to be

questioned. Which society? The war destructiveness, both physical and moral, undermined the fabric of the national past, yesterday's values were dismissed but the vacuum they left hadn't been replaced. In this desolate and abandoned land that was post war Europe, Nihilist theorization found a fertile ground. The empirical reality that escaped the war bears scars of violence, twenty millions people killed is a powerful cold number that cannot reveal the tragedy. Art will assume responsibility to show the way out from the recent past. The artistic problematic all along the decades between the two world wars is the representation of the unimaginable. At stake is not only the esthetic problem, but the limit of representation itself, how to describe terror or the modern phenomenon of de-subjectification, this slow process that sees the idea of a subject fragmenting into pieces since Copernic ruled him out from the center of the Universe. The first half of the Twentieth century will see Western intellectuals engaged on describing an escape towards catastrophe, Adorno will theorize the end of art, Foucault the end of man and Nietzsche the end of God. The spectacle of unprecedented atrocity undermined the subject sense of integrity, shuttles between the catastrophes of fragmentation (life as representation) and the catastrophe of fascism. What modernism tout court does, with a well-known display of attempts, (Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Symbolism, Dadaism, Surrealism) is to examine the paradox and indefinable forces underlying the existence. By redefining concepts on which we based our human perception, space and time, history, and therefore human life, cease to be an ordered sequence of event but a rather chaotic experience that we don't quite understand.

*The Buddenbrooks* inability to adjust to the switch from mercantilism to financial capitalism and their progressive decline with the death of the family last head renders properly the idea of the European socio-historical dimension. The fast decline of Bourgeois family is as well the decline of one of the most pretentious idea of the Western civilization, the idea of progress, and its cultural platform, science, whose mistake, the capitalist sin (as Marxist intellectual would call it), had been to place itself where the unknown always stood. The illusion of greatness blinded for over half a century every single corner, every single man of Europe. After reaching a climax, science has accepted the fact that cannot entirely explain the individual through category of cause and effect (category proper of the natural science), in fact science, the very same science that enlightened the sky of the European cities, will conclude by saying that there are realms, zones that we cannot explain, *what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence*<sup>4</sup>, a moment of shadow, indefinable and incomprehensible.

<sup>2</sup> V. Woolf, *Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown*, in *Collected Essays*, volume 1, London, 1966, p.321

<sup>3</sup> W.B. Yeats, *the Second Coming*.

<sup>4</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Oxford University Press, London

This confession will bring the implosion of one of the main positivist assumption, the reductionist assumption that the methodology used by the natural science was the only valid. Altogether, it is the collapse of a more important idea, the idea of a perfect world, organized according perfect rules and science as the absolute tool towards knowledge. Dilthey et al.'s contributions on dismantling the Positivist world are enormous, but probably the most efficacious argument is given, strange to believe, from natural sciences. The world as we knew it had been always based on Galileo and Newton's theory, from here the idea to deal with a Universe structured as a machine and therefore potentially explainable. Quantum physic will produce an epistemic revolution that will change the very fundament of every possible human knowledge. Heisenberg with his *Uncertainty principle* states that we cannot measure simultaneously the position and speed of an object because the energy we produce by observing the phenomenon will modify the phenomenon itself in unpredictable ways. It basically states the failure of the past century mechanistic design replaced now by probability and therefore indetermination. Gödel's *Incompleteness theorem* states that within any formal system there are prepositions, statements that, to an analytical superior level, cannot either be proved or disproved, while we still recognize them as true. Basically arguing against the logicism, that vice versa asserts the translatability of every axiom, and finally proving that mind cannot be explained as a machine. Besides physical connotation of the theory itself, we shall focus on the consequences of the theory. Natural science, a dimension that until then was considered undoubtable correct, is now saying that in fact it is all a matter of agreement more or less acceptable. But accepting that there is a part of reality that cannot be measured or known has an enormous impact on the way we look at things. The transaction from classic to modern physic changed forever our prospective, because it legitimates the concept of entropy introducing in the everyday life an element of chaos and eventually apocalypse. The European intelligence like never before is riding the wave of a catastrophic breaking up: what is to be done next seems to be the question of the new century. Facing the dawn of a new age or the end of history?

### **The problem of modernity**

It is wide open the problem of modernity: from a Marxist point of view it is a sharp sense of inadequacy due to the fact that man does not own what he produces. From a more laic point of view the bankrupt of positivism, the myth of science and progress, goes along with the negation of an objective reality and the attempt of a rational de-codification. The work of Rilke, Hofmannsthal, Kafka, Wittgenstein they all go in this direction, and few years later, the 1929 economic crisis will increase even

more the insecurity, liability, of the all system. Never before, like in this particular and extremely reach cultural moment, the philosophical and historical framework matches so precisely. This work will try to give a snowball of con-causes producing the crumbling down of a world that was believed to travel unavoidably towards overwhelming achievements. Positivism has entered the fall of its process: guilty not to let space to the spiritual manifestation of human being, it has finally accepted the idea that science cannot entirely explain human being, maybe not at all, more than this there are dark and shadowed zones of man's life that cannot be explained through the categories of cause and effect proper of natural sciences. From here we assist to the decline of some of the main assumptions of the past century: monism methodologic, asserting that the scientific methodology was the only valid among all the methodology of investigation; reductionism methodologic, the attempt to bend every methodology of investigation as if dealing with immutable fact; scientism, the blind faith in science as only valid knowledge; mechanic determinism, the idea of a world thought as perfect machine. What Europe is breathing in this *fin de siècle* atmosphere is a very complex anti-positivist reaction: against the scientific vision of the existence, against the historical translation of positivist philosophy, Marxism indeed, it is now claimed the priority of spirit over material, as to say the priority of everything was before addressed as metaphysic, synonymous of nothingness. Against the aseptic confidence in progress, scholars point out the contradiction that such a progress has brought on the surface: capitalist economy enlarges the gap between rich and poor, on a bigger scale wealthy and third world country, the introduction of machines into the system of production have created a surplus of labor forces and therefore unemployment, slaughters of nation and entire civilization have been accomplished in the name of God, class struggle, wars, exploitation, violation of all the new human civil rights just then emerged. Was it then really this the progress? There is a shadow of futility and hopelessness framing the most sensitive consciousness, because no matter from which prospective we decide to study this social phenomenon, be it liberal or conservative, Marxist or capitalist, modern society, the greatest accomplishment of the Nineteenth century, has collapsed leaving behind lack of order and the bankrupt of science. From now on the European literati will be engaged with a new class of problem: not science for science won't pretend to discuss any more about the last goal of mankind, (satisfied by setting hypothesis regarding the origins/Darwinism), but humanity itself, the misery of mankind in the economy of the universe since the old civil and religious values came less. The impression is to be facing the decadence of the anthropocentric paradigm, Copernicus refused to place men in the center of the universe, Darwin reduced men to developed animals, Freud made of it an entanglement of instinct, Foucault

declared his death. And yet China at the dawn of May Fourth seems to ignore it. After having given a detailed historical picture of Europe, we can finally go back to the Chinese stage; it might be easier now to understand the title of this paper.

#### May Fourth: Historical misunderstanding?

Social Darwinism opened the mind of young Chinese intellectuals while Chinese traditions were pushed into the shadow. More in general science and all this concept brings along in terms of achievements, progress, development was what most impressed the young Chinese students in the first decades of the Twentieth century. Lu Xun's devotion to science led him to study medicine to reflect about the scientific origin of human nature and the Chinese character, as much as Emile Zola did while unfolding his theory on Naturalism and the scientific method. But then Lu Xun understood that the best medium to achieve his goal was literature rather than science, and yet he is an exception on the Chinese platform back then. Mr. Wu Chih-Hui is an iconoclast figure remembered for his declaration, anti-Confucianists cry: *'All thread-bound (old-style) books should be dumped in the lavatory.'* There is an essay, as well, written by the same in 1923, titled,

*'A New Conception of the Universe and of Life, Based up on a New Belief.'* We should now linger on it for a while considering the shocking resemblance with the European counterpart some years before:

*"The universe is a greater life. Its substance involves energy at the same time. To use another term, it may also be called power. From this power the will is produced (...) When the will comes into contact with the external world, sensations ensue, and when these sensations are welcomed or resisted, feelings arise. To make sure that the feelings are correct, thought arises to constitute the intellect. (...) this is intuition. What is the need of any spiritual element or the so-called soul, which never meets any real need anyway?"*<sup>5</sup>

The reference to energy and will is a clear reference to Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, abolished is the concept of soul, spirit over material, abolished is any metaphysical platonic invisible world, or the idea of a cunning reason leading, processing men's life towards a predetermined goal, but man becomes expression of an irrational will, a moment of chaos where energy converge to determine our being, material rather than spiritual. The mechanistic conception of the universe unfolds more

evident in the next passage:

*"I firmly believe that men of this age are far superior to those of any previous age; and I believe that men of the coming ages will be even better than us. And I firmly believe that the more advanced material civilization becomes, the more plentiful will material goods be, the human race will tend more and more to unity, and complicated problems will be more and more easily solved. I believe that morality is the crystallization of civilization and that there has never been a low morality when civilization reached a higher state and I believe that all things in the universe can be explained by science."*<sup>6</sup>

He goes on as following the positivist delirium, the greatest achievements of man is science together with all its applications which greatly multiply the power of man.

Mankind has greatly improved with the advancement of science and technology for man has never achieved a moral life, anywhere or at any time in history, which can be proved to be higher than that of the age of science and its machines. He maintains that no religion, but science alone will be needed to make mankind better and more moral. He tries to prove that all the moral sentiments expressed in the old religious systems and moral philosophies were merely empty words without the ability to realize what they stood for. He therefore, ruled out God from the system banishing the soul, spirit, all those spiritual elements that Europe one century before had dismissed as well, but was now reevaluating as only solution to step away from the nihilist impasse. Wu Chih Hui, and like him an army of intellectuals, apparently ignored the western discourse over science, the regretful experience of European achievements, in fact in China on the wave of May Fourth everyone seems ignoring the contradiction brought by modernity, either because modernity hadn't arrived yet or for some kind of intellectual blindness, the fact is that the model that a Chinese generation had taken to be set as example sounds like a cultural anachronism for it didn't exist anymore, or at least those who invented it recognize it as wrong. Very few literati in China were aware of the European postwar pessimism which we have seen contagiously spread easily over every intellectual discipline.

Among those few is Liang Ch'i Ch'ao<sup>7</sup> who after having crossed the oceans few times and after having gone through different stages of understanding finally aligned his intellectual position with that of the western intelligentsia. It took some time to persuade himself that emulating western culture was not the way to guarantee success to China considering that the materialistic western society had yes achieved progress but such a progress left that society spiritually bankrupt. And he

<sup>5</sup> Conception of the universe and of life based upon a new belief, in Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement*, Stanford University Press, California, 1967

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See *Impression of a European Journey*

goes on accusing science not to be the savior of mankind because the solution for the riddle of life could not be found through the channels of chemistry or mathematics. He draws a beautiful metaphor where men are like travelers in the desert and have lost their direction. At distance they see a black shadow and they run towards it thinking that it might lead them somewhere but as soon as they caught a part of it, the shadow suddenly disappeared. The shadow was obviously Science, that Europe had seen as a guide and now turn up being bankrupt. It must be said that he read very well the European situation, he saw the turning point of modernity, a civilization characterized now by insecurity and sense of loss but Chinese economic and political condition in 1920 were not solid enough to sustain this point of view. We do not have to forget that China was mostly a country of peasants and farmers; the infant modern economy and the civil wars had depredated Chinese soil; consequently the rural economy collapsed increasing the number of landless and unemployed. Especially, in the northern province of China, life conditions were particularly severe, houses were stripped of doors so that the wood could be burn for warmth, children were sold as slave, girls as prostitute, villagers reduced to eat tree leaves and epidemics decimating those already weak.

Given this condition no wonder China succumbed to the magic of an idea: Progress. But then we are called to define progress, for this is a word ambiguous as few. In 1919, or in 1945, in which way the condition of European citizen were better than during the golden age of the Roman Empire? If as long as time goes, so does progress, how do we compare the perception of safety during the Renaissance and just before Auschwitz? As to say that history is certainly progressive but it might not bear progress, evolution leads necessarily to a change but a change not necessarily brings a better status quo. It depends on the point of view we use to judge it. Would we say that Guernica (Picasso) is better than Mona Lisa (da Vinci)? Or would we say that Naturalism is better than Romanticism? We wouldn't, for when it comes to art, we reason for accumulation but not progress. Brunelleschi in the XIV century invented the linear perspective, to some extent we could conclude that without him we wouldn't have had all what came after him, we wouldn't have had Renaissance, we wouldn't have had Expressionism, we wouldn't have had abstractism. Without pointillism we would not have had impressionism, and yet we do not dare to label the process of artistic evolution as progress. Why is so? Because art before being connected is independent, art is gifted of an independent beauty which transcends the epoch it was conceived in, and it is enough to itself. Art survives indeed. But history is different, because history forgets and because history dies. That is why it has to find always a link, a hook to the next age that quite shallowly we tend to define always as better than the previous ones. Progress again. But we would misread history if we blindly accepted it. What

happened is that the coming of the Twentieth century found China unprepared, China jumped to the new age too soon, or maybe rushing in because it felt it was already too late. Following the example of Nineteenth century Europe, China succumbed to the magic of progress, the beauty of a spell, evil caused by science; the lights of Shanghai at night pointed out for a while the way out of the past. But it was an illusion, Chinese tradition could not hold back the impact of western ideology and so it started the process of unconditional acculturation, erosion of culture, imitation rather than defense of uniqueness, yet they did not realize that when the western spirit was not good but bad, the Chinese spirit was not only Chinese, but good. If there is an issue that deserves to be discussed is that the choice between China and Europe, between eastern and western philosophy is a false choice.

Back in 1920, like today, China did not need to be westernized but modernized, without forgetting that the idea of history, which is the uniqueness of a nation's people, transcends the ideas of values, which is the decoration of an epoch. Importing western ideas therefore, no matter how shining they are, on a Chinese contest could not, and still cannot be the panacea for Chinese quest of a civil society. There is the call for an independent critical thinking, which starts from an objective analysis of the past. This is the only progress China should yearn for. A question remains: Will the West civilization cure China or kill it? But this is material for another paper (Goldman, 1977, Mu Fu-sheng, 1963; Macfarquhar and Schoenhals, 2006).

### Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

### REFERENCES

- Bei D (1986). *Waves*, New Generation Book, New York.
- Charles AM (1967). *The Chinese Mind*, East-West Center Press, Honolulu.
- Chow T (1978). *The May Fourth Movement. Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*, Stanford University Press, California.
- Chu-yuan C (1990). *Behind the Tiananmen Massacre*, Westview Press, Oxford.
- Goldman M (1977). *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era*, Harvard University Press, London.
- Hualing N (1981). *Literature of the Hundred Flowers*, Columbia University Press,
- Liang Ch'i-Ch'ao (1967). *The Mind of Modern China*, University of California Press, Los Angeles.
- Lin YS (1979). *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, University of Wisconsin Press, London.
- Lowith K (2000). *Da Hegel a Nietzsche*, Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, Torino.
- Macfarquhar R, Schoenhals M (2006). *Mao's Last Revolution*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Mu Fu-sheng (1963). *The Wilting of the Hundred Flowers*, Frederick A. Praeger Publisher, New York.



Simmel G (1968). *The conflict in Modern Culture: and other essays*, Teachers College Press,  
 Simmel G (1990). *Philosophy of money*, Routledge, London.

**ONLINE SOURCES**

The May Fourth Movement Redefined, Joseph T. Chen, in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 4, No 1 (1970) Published by: Cambridge University Press/ Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/311753>  
 Teaching May Fourth Fiction, Cyril Birch in *Modern Chinese Literature Newsletter*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring, 1976), pp. 1-16 Published by: Foreign Language Publications/ Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42769587>  
 Reflections on the May Fourth Movement: A Symposium by Benjamin I. Schwartz in *Modern Asian Studies* , Vol. 10, No. 2 (1976), pp. 305-308 Published by: Cambridge University Press / Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/311811>  
 Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era by Merle Goldman in *The China Quarterly*, No. 74 (Jun., 1978), pp. 425-427 Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the School of Oriental and African Studies/ Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/652710>  
 The Day Confucius Died in The May Fourth Movement. Intellectual Revolution in Modern China. by Chow Tse-tsung , *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Feb., 1961), pp. 221-226 Published by: Association for Asian Studies/ Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2050487>

The re-emergence of May Fourth in China, Bonnie S. McDougall, in *Modern Chinese Literature Newsletter*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring, 1978), pp. 8-12 Published by: Foreign Language Publications/ Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42769978>  
 The May Fourth Movement. by Chow Tse-tung in *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Summer, 1961), pp. 199-200 Published by: Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2752996>  
 Scientism in Chinese Thought, 1900-1950] by D. W. Y. Kwok in *The American Historical Review* Vol. 72, No. 2 (Jan., 1967) Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Historical Association/ Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1859402>.  
 Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Intellectual Changes in the Late Nineteenth Century , Hao Chang in *The Journal of Asian Studies* , Vol. 29, No. 1 (Nov., 1969), pp. 23-33. Published by: Association for Asian Studies/ Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2942520>