

# Liang Shuming: A Dedicated Explorer for Possible Germination of Democracy in the Confucian China

Jiang Chunlan and Cao Shuming

**Abstract**—In the 20s and 30s of the last century, Liang Shuming, admitting the value of democracy itself, denied the possibility that the Chinese culture could develop to a democratic system by itself. In the 40s Liang changed his views and asserted that the Chinese culture was endowed with the spirit of democracy despite the fact that that spirit in the Chinese political system was far from sufficient. Different as they were, the characteristics of Liang's views in the 20s through 30s and those of his views in the 40s have their respective significance in the development of China's ideological history. This paper presents a detailed survey with analysis and reaffirms Liang Shuming as a dedicated explorer for democratic germination in the Confucian China.

**Index Terms**—Liang Shuming, Chinese culture, democracy.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Twentieth Century saw a tripartite co-existence of Liberalism, Marxism and Conservatism performing plays of their own on the ideological stage in China, but the three major schools, different as they were, all without exception, acknowledged the values of the Western democracy. Different from Liberalism and Marxism which saw the gulf between the traditional Chinese Confucianism and the ideas of the Western democracy as unbridgeable, the Neo-Confucianism, the main stay of Cultural Conservatism, took the route of “return to the origin so as to open a new vision”. To make it specific, that means “return to the very essence of the traditional Confucianism so as to open a new vision of modern democratic politics in China.” It is only natural that Liang Shuming, the founder of New Confucianism, took as his life-long endeavor the scrutiny of the problems concerning democracy in China. In fact, whether the cultural values passed down from generation to generation and inherited thus could be adapted to modernization is the main question Liang Shuming felt obliged to find an answer to.

The historical fact shows that the scholarly studies mainly focused on Mr Liang's publications in the 20s and 30s of the last century, i.e., *The Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Respective Philosophies*(1921), and *The Final Awakening of the China's National Self-Salvation* (1932), but no sufficient attention was paid to his important publications in the 40s such as *What Is Democracy, And What Does Democracy Mean?*, *The Two Features of the Chinese Culture*, *The Democracy in Politics and the Chinese People* and the series of treaties of the kind as well

as Liang's discussion of the relationship between the Chinese Culture and the notion of the newly imported democracy in *The Relationship between the Traditional Chinese Culture and Democracy*. And the changes in Liang's views on that relationship in the years that followed were largely ignored. This paper will present a general survey of Liang Shuming's ideas of the Western democracy and realization in China.

## II. LIANG'S VIEWPOINT IN 20S AND 30S

In 1920, Liang Shuming delivered a lecture with *The Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Respective Philosophies* as its topic in Peking University, and in August, 1921, he delivered another lecture with the same topic at Shandong Education Bureau. In October of the same year, Mr Liang combined, with improvement, the two lectures into one book entitled *The Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Respective Philosophies* and got it published by Peking Treasury Department Press. The booklet was again published by Shanghai Commercial Publishing House in January, 1922.

The book was a great success and received heated reactions immediately after its publication. To some extent, its publication announced the author as the founder of the Neo-Confucianism in modern China. With China, India and the Western countries as three model cultures, Mr Liang brought forth a theory of three cultural orientations reaffirming the values of Confucianism against the main stream of the ideological movement in the period of the May 4 Movement, the main task of which was to repudiate and overthrow the domination of Confucianism in China. Liang Shuming maintained that the “Western culture held as its core value the prospect motivated by desire”,<sup>[1]</sup> whereas “the Chinese culture held as its core value the moderation modified through self-control and reconciliation, and the Indian culture held as its core value the retrospect dominated by self-examination”.<sup>[2]</sup> Based on those analyses, Liang Shuming asserted that the future of the World culture would witness a rejuvenation of the Chinese culture because both the Chinese culture and the Indian culture were matured cultures respectively in the second and the third stages of development whereas the western culture was in the indispensable first stage of development. Liang Shuming pointed out that the Western culture temporarily prevailed only because it was effectively adapted to man's immediate interest, and contrary to this were the Chinese culture and the Indian culture which fell out of fashion. For China, the most attractive feature of the Western culture had two manifestations: science and democracy, two products of the spirit of the Westerners' desire-motivated prospect.<sup>[3]</sup> Then Mr. Liang further put forth his views on the characteristics

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of the democracy from the West and whether the Chinese culture could take the democratic road of development.

First, the characteristics of democracy. In the mind of a traditional Chinese, it is essential to have a man to govern the world, to contemplate and manage things on behalf of all others. This man "makes unrestrained decisions without any consideration of others' interest; all others listen to him, and what's more, listen docilely to him only." [1] Contrary to this, the western democracy is all fellows together make decisions within the acceptable limit; all fellows make limited decisions, and together listen to limited orders.

Liang Shuming said that the Westerners demanded their rights and defended their freedom, and therefore, their democracy had two easily discernible features. "The first is that everyone has the right to participate in decision-making in every thing related to public welfares, and the second is that no one has the right to interfere in others' personal affairs.[1] To Mr Liang, these two features of the western democracy are nothing but the products of the institutionalisation of the concept of man and that of self.

Second, possibility (or impossibility rather) of the Chinese culture to take the road to democracy. Liang Shuming asserted, "If the Western culture had not had any contact with us and China had itself walled in without any ventilator, we would not have had those ships, trains, aircrafts, scientific methods and the notion of democracy even in three hundred, or five hundred, or one thousand years, and therefore, democracy could, by no means, have appeared in China", [1] and this is simply because China and the West had different cultural orientations, thus moving on different routes to different destinations. If China and the West had taken the same route with speed as the only difference, then China could some day catch up, but the reality is that China and the West were moving on different routes leading to different destinations, China could never reach the West's destination.

In 1930, Liang Shuming further elaborated his ideas on that issue. First, he provided two terms to name the two conspicuous features of democracy. They are the citizens rights and man's right to pursue freedom. As names, the two terms also unvail the function of a social system of democracy: There is more than enough room for you to do noble things, but little room for you to do otherwise; full tapping of the talent of savants, and no need to wait for a particular individual to govern. [2] After that, he focused his analysis on multiple causes that led to the failure of democracy in China. In his article "The Final Awakening of the Chinese National Self-Salvation" (Cun Zhi. Vol.3. July 1, 1930.), Liang Shuming summarized his analysis in two causes. First, the so-called democracy was what the westerners had achieved after their revolt against the oppression by their rulers, and the so-called equality and freedom were nothing but the result of their tenacious fight for the right endowed by human nature, which forced the governing to come to a recognition as a result of power balance for a guarantee against infringement. How could it be that a people with a national character conditioned and cultivated in and by the ethical environment that had endured over thousands of years might dabble with a foreign thing of that kind?

The second cause is the more effective one. Mr Liang said,

"The Western culture overwhelmingly forced people to reach out for a solution, but the Chinese culture was totally different: the Chinese system provided opportunities for you to pursue your own future." [3] In "The Modern European Political Route: Our First Political impasse" (Cun Zhi. Vol. 3, 6, 7. July 1, September 1, September 16.) , Mr Liang's analysis of the causes goes even deeper.

First, a democratic political system is a system for the people and therefore by the people, but the revolution of the political system launched in China was merely an imitative attempt by the Chinese intellectuals, and because it was foreign, not native but imported from abroad; therefore, the imitative movement was not a serious need of those intellectuals, and what's more, it was not the immediate need of the most Chinese either. Second, the material condition, such as overall very low living standards, under-developed transportation facilities in a country of enormous territory, poor industry and scanty commerce; Third, the national temperament does not fit, and this is the very cause underlying the "never wins" of the democratic system in China. Mr Liang then summarised: 1) The personality of the Chinese people was characterised by passive restraint, mutual adjustment and reconciliation. This poses as the opposite of the westerners' outward search, or revolt if there is oppression, or counterbalance so as to achieve a new balance.[2] 2) The noble personality such as uprightness and modesty the Chinese people upheld did not conform to the requirements of the election system in the Western culture; 3) The political system of democracy in the Western culture was based on the belief that "man was born evil," thus mutual distrust underlied human relationship, whereas the first important personality the Chinese people respected and liked to see in a gentleman when he presented himself was trustworthiness, and the first important personality the Chinese people respected and liked to see in a gentleman when he dealt with others was etiquette. [2] 4) The modern European political system was a "desire for material comfort" political system, and its special interest and effort were given to safeguard and satisfy that desire, but the Chinese people advocated and upheld the pursuit of values of a meaningful human life. With the scrutiny and exploration as presented above, Liang Shuming maintained that China could not take the democratic road. Mr Liang kept this stance even in his book *The Theory for Rural Reconstruct* published in 1937, where he reaffirmed his stance, and said, "It is not that China has not embarked on a democratic road; it is that China will never embark on a democratic road." [4]

Although he denied the possibility that China could embark on a democratic system, Liang Shuming had never denied democracy itself, and on the contrary, he held fast a positive belief in democracy. In "The Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Respective Philosophies," Liang said, "The so-called science" and "democracy" of the West are the two things no people in the world can do without [1], and therefore, in dealing with these two, the only thing we can do is to unconditionally acknowledge it, or entirely accept it.[1] In a speech in Peking University, 1932, he declared again that the spirit of the Western democracy "has its own values" because "as far as social life is concerned, all humanity shares the same values." [5] That is to say, the

Chinese people can acknowledge and accept the ideas of modern politics. Judging from this point, we believe that Mr Liang Shuming of this historical period experienced a dilemma: on one hand, he firmly believed that China should not take a road to democracy, but on the other, he also firmly believed that the Chinese people, like their Western counterpart, also share the values of democracy. In essence, Mr Liang's dilemma originated from his own contradictory views, that is, he advocated the return to Confucianism,[6] but at the same time he also highly praised the values of the Western democracy. In other words, he maintained that first of all China should take the first route, i.e., the route of science-democracy the West took (and Liang's ideas of China's rural reconstruct is also a trial implementation of the Western science-democracy route), and at the same time he also maintained that China could not develop from Confucianism into democratic social and political system. And that is how Mr Liang Shuming consequently placed Confucianism in a palace in air although he had made great effort to promote the "revival of the Chinese people's own life attitudes." [1] Within his ideological framework, Liang Shuming held that Confucianism at that time was perfect but useless; its only value was that it stood there as a sign of home to return to in the future. This is simply opposed to his initial hope for a rejuvenation of Confucianism. It is probable that Mr Liang detected the flaw in his contradictory views, therefore, in the 40s he modified his views accordingly.

### III. LIANG'S VIEWPOINT IN 40S

In the 40s, Liang Shuming published *An Interpretation of the Agreement of This Newspaper* (Guangming Daily, Sept. 19, 1941), *Two Major Features of the Chinese Culture* (Guangming Daily, Sept. 31, 1941), *What Is Democracy? What Does Democracy Mean?* (Guangming Daily, Sept. 20, 1941), *The Political Democracy and the Chinese People* (Guangming Daily, Sept. 30, Oct. 1-4, 6, 12, 14, and Nov. 8, 1941), *The Implications of Democracy* (Knowledge of the Time, July, 1943), *A Prediction of the Election Disaster and A Post-Election Inquiry of Constitutionalism* (Survivalance, Vol. 3-4&5, Sept., 1947), *China's Route to Constitutionalism* (Democracy and Constitution, Vol. 1-3-5, 1944) and other democracy-related essays. Liang Shuming also summarised his views in his book *The Highlights of the Chinese Culture*, a comparative study revealing great changes in author's views on the Chinese culture and democracy. Liang Shuming at this period not only held that China needed democracy, but also maintained that democracy "should develop from the culture it originated, and it should also free itself of the present reality." [7] Liang Shuming's stance is opposed to his stance in the 20s through 30s when he insisted that China could never move out of its own culture into the Western democracy. We believe that the great change in Mr Liang's stance is caused by his direct involvement in the campaign for democracy-constitutionalism and his independent contemplation on implications and essence of democracy as well as the distinction between cultural democracy and political democracy.

On September 20, 1941, Liang Shuming published an article "Democracy is the Spirit or Trend in Man's Social

Life" (Guangming Daily). [8] In the article of June, 1943, "Implications of Democracy" (Knowledge of the Time, Guilin), Mr Liang explained why and how he came to that definition of democracy. He said, "By spirit, I mean it is not static and dull. By trend, I mean it can develop from one extreme end." [9] I use these two terms simply because it is not possible to make clear-cut definitions to assert whether they actually exist. All those interpretations, definitions and comments on democracy clearly indicate that they are all Mr Liang's elaborations on the subject. As we know, the origin of the word "democracy" is the Greek word "demokratia." "Demo" means "people" and "kratos" means "rule," thus, "demokratia" is "people's rule" or "rule by people." Judging by this fact, what Chen Duxiu, the Marxist, said is closer to the original meaning of the term: "The Western democracy holds humanism as its essence, and this is what democracy is all about when Lincoln said 'by people' in stead of 'for people'." [10] However, Liang Shuming's definition is helpful in his exploration for the spirit of democracy in the Chinese culture despite that his does not conform to Marxism.

No doubt that it is the definition "spirit" or "trend" that helped change Liang's assertion he speculated in the 20s and 30s that "Confucius deterred not only China's science but also China's democratisation" and that the Chinese culture was endowed with the democratic spirit. However, in Liang's mind, the so-called democratic spirit in the Chinese culture is different from that in the Western culture: "The democratic spirit is largely built in habitual actions whereas that in China largely on conscientious need. The Chinese have lofty aspirations and superior comprehension ability, and they do not want to waste much time to understand it." [11] It is easily seen that Mr Liang took the position of the China supremacy" when he made those assertions, and therefore, the fairness of his elaborations may be questioned.

The next question following the clarification of the Implications of democracy is: What is the spirit of democracy? In "An Interpretation of This Newspaper's Agreement on Speech," Liang Shuming held that the spirit had two manifest features: the grace of tolerating the views of one's opponents and obedience to the decision by the majority, [12] but in "What Is Democracy? What Does Democracy Mean?", "The Implications of Democracy," "Where Do the Obstacles Hindering China's Democratic Development Lie?" (Guangming Daily, Sept. 21, 1941) and "Two Major Features of the Chinese Culture" and other articles, Mr Liang summarised the features in five kinds. The contents of all the above articles are more or less similar. Liang Shuming pointed out that the democratic spirit had the following five components: "1. acknowledgement of the other; 2. equality; 3. ability to reason; 4. respect for majority; and 5. respect for personal freedom." [8] He further maintained, "The 2 through 5 are all derivatives from the basic first component. All the five exist in human nature and none of them is unusual," [13] and "if the five or one of the five appears at a particular moment or place in social life, it can be identified as a manifestation of democracy. These five are interrelated; they don't have to appear together at one time. All of the five may appear or hide anywhere or everywhere, anytime or all the time." [9] But what are the manifestations of the five in the Chinese culture? Liang

Shuming said, "The manifestation of the first is sufficient, and so is the third. The second, i.e., equality, has a problem: equality and rank&distinction are simultaneously acknowledged. The fourth only exists as an idea, and it is not found in actual life. The fifth has a difficulty, too: sometimes it is there, but it is not some other times, and it is largely neglected in life. In other words, "The deficiency in the Chinese culture regarding democracy demonstrates in the fourth and fifth components." [14] In Liang Shuming's mind, the reason could be summarised in the following two points. First, the Chinese are "not a people of action." [11] Although the Chinese people "have lofty aspiration and superior comprehension ability," [11] as Mr Liang described, they can not live up to those lofty standards, and that assertion Mr Liang made about the Chinese people may be erroneous, because the principal quality the ancient saints firmly upheld in man's dealing with things in veryday life is the "unity of words and actions." Confucius said, "Gentlemen feel ashamed if their words go beyond their actions" (Analects·Xianwen), and "When you speak, you have to consider how you should act; when you act, you have to consider what you have said" (The Doctrine of Mean) and so on. How could that be that the Chinese people are not a people of action? Second, China had no political life, or rather, no social life (life of society). Liang Shuming held that the Chinese people's social life was composed of connections of family, religion, clan, hometown fellows, and friends, and Mr Liang said that these connections were of democratic nature. But, according to Mr Liang, the Chinese people may be in want of social life, especially that of very powerful societies. Liang Shuming said, the Chinese people "are very passive in state life, and as a result, no habit of democratic nature is developed." [11] The cause that underlied the phenominon, Liang Shuming continued, is that "The Chinese people hold their families at the center of life, whereas the Westerners have their societies at the center." [14] And the deficiency or even absence of societies are in turn due to the deficiency of religion from early days, the depletion of which was filled up by the rational Confucian teachings. Finally, Liang Shuming concluded, "The Chinese culture has been endowed with democratic spirit from ancient days, but it is very weak in politics." He pushed his views even further, "China practiced democracy early and was not influenced by it, and on the contrary, the trend of modern democracy in the West had been actually influenced by the Chinese culture." Here it is obvious that Liang Shuming made his point in terms of the spirit of democracy. In "Political Democracy and the Chinese People" published in 1941, Liang Shuming further explained, "The so-called political democracy is nothing but the democracy required in collective/societal life." [14] To practice democracy, a society must meet the demands of all members. 1. "Every member has the right to participate in decision-making for all public affairs"; 2. "All private affairs of a member have nothing to do with the society and the society has no right to interfere." [15] It is easily seen that those two requirements correspond to the fourth and fifth components of democracy Mr Liang previously put forth. Judging by all this in a reversed order, we find that Mr Liang seems to insinuate to us that although we do not have the two components in our political life, we are not in want

of them in our culture, and if that is true, it is possible that the Chinese culture might exercise them in political life in future.

Let us to be fair in judging Mr Liang. Mr Liang Shuming's generalisation of the so-called democratic spirit is still an interpretation in the Chinese fashion. That is, his understanding and Interpretation of the democratic spirit is developed out of his experience of the Chinese culture. And furthermore, it is also questionable whether the Chinese culture has that spirit as he asserted. Take the "ability to reason" for example. Many scholars maintain that "the traditional Chinese culture values compassion more than reasoning," [16] 208 and then Mr Liang's assertion that the Chinese culture was endowed with democratic spirit is still open to further discussion.

In fact, Liang Shuming may not be wholeheartedly present the so-called democratic spirit in the Chinese culture because as early as the 1930s he had already proposed an Interpretation principle: "We can treat Confucianism as a very broad and very ordinary domain, as broad and ordinary enough to incorporate the ideas that are opposed to it. It doesn't matter much if we do so." [1] It is possible that the revival of Confucianism through modern transformation is more important than get to the fundamental meaning of Confucianism. However, we must make it clear that Mr Liang's division of democracy into two dimensions is insightful, for it paved the way for further elaboration of the democratic spirit in the Chinese culture.

According to Liang Shuming, the present "undemocratic political life" could not do away with the fact that the democratic spirit exists in the culture, and in turn, abundant existence of democracy in culture is a political guarantee because "A political problem is only superficial, not essential, and the political problem is only a partial not the whole problem; it is essentially a question concerning the culture itself as a whole." [17] As the essence and the whole, the culture is therefore the motive force for the superficial politics. And of course, the implementation of political democracy "depends on the socialisation of economical life." [18].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The 1920s and 1930s witnessed two stages in Liang Shuming's elaborations on the issue of democracy in the Chinese culture, and each of the two presented different and sometimes even contradictory views on the subject. However, viewed from the perspective of the Chinese ideological history, each of the two retains a special significance of its own. Liang Shuming's insistence to promulgating the spirit of democracy as a modern political concept speaks for his effort to keep up with time even if he denied the existence of a natural connection between the Chinese culture and the Western democracy. Moreover, highly praiseworthy is Mr Liang's idea of "culture's three orientations" that provides a rationale for the continuous existence and a possible revival of the Confucianism-centered traditional Chinese culture.

Mr Liang's perseverance, insistence, and dedicated promulgation of Confucianism particularly announced his Confucianist identity and won him the title "Last of the

Confucianists,"[19]and the title "Neo-Confucianist" is a recognition and full acceptance of his ideas of science and democracy as the core values of the Western culture. Nevertheless, it is also regretful that Mr Liang failed, after strenuous effort, to find a solution to bridge the gap between the mind-cultivation/renovation of the Chinese culture and the Western science and democracy.

In the 1940s, redefining the democratic Implications, further exploration of the democratic spirit in the Chinese culture, and the classification of political democracy and cultural democracy, Liang Shuming took a decisively important step forward in the history of the Neo-Confucianism. Differing from Du Yaquan, a cultural conservatist in pre-May 4 movement days, who regarded the humanist element in the Chinese culture as an equivalence of democracy and said, "inspection by people and inquiry by people, significance of people and insignificance of monarch, all this is the basic principle of politics since antiquity. It is no other but humanism." [20]It is Liang Shuming who coined the term "spirit of democracy," which makes it possible to incorporate some Chinese idea. To some extent, Liang's "spirit of democracy" is a product of the merge of the Chinese and Western cultures, and the advocacy and application of the concept helped build the bridge to connect the Confucianism and the Western democracy. Liang's innovation may not conform to the original meaning of Confucianism, but every single development of Confucianism, the Confucianism of the Han and Tang Dynasties and the idealism of the Song and Ming Dynasties for instance, did not set the tracing back to the origin as its ultimate goal. Liang Shuming has opened a new domain for Confucianism and provided a theoretical possibility of its revival.

It is undeniable that the followers of Neo-Confucianism such as Xiong Shili who connected Confucianism and democracy through the relationship between experience and application, and Mou Zongsan who advocated the "collapse of conscience" theory to support his theoretical framework "indigenous Script brings forth a new and foreign sovereign," they all took the route Liang Shuming had traversed.

Before we end this paper, let us read a passage quoted from the Communique of the Association of Modern Neo-Confucianism: "We do not deny that the Chinese culture has no seeds of democracy, and their internal demand for political development is not for the construction of a democratic system." [21]The ideals of freedom and democracy in the Western culture "have universal and eternal values, and therefore peoples of other cultures respect, praise, learn and imitate them so as to compete with the Westerners on equal terms. The passage quoted from the Communique can be read as a concise summary of Mr Liang Shuming's findings, as presented in this paper, and an indirect announcement, conscious or unconscious, that Mr Liang Shuming as a dedicated explorer for possible germination of democracy in the Confucian China. [21]

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Cao Shuming provided guidance and suggestions on the research; Jiang Chunlan conducted the research; Jiang Chunlan and Cao Shuming approved the final version.

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