

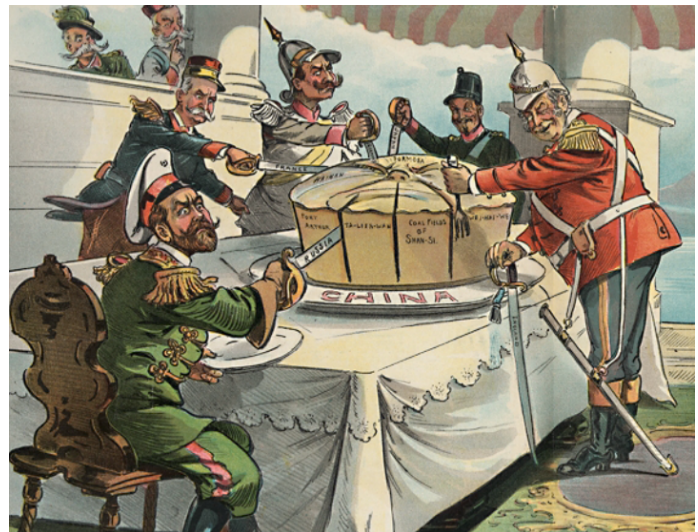
China - 2000 Years of Successful Humanism - Then Europe Attacked

From around 200 BC to the Chinese revolution of 1911, China was mostly governed according to the principles of Confucius, the great humanist philosopher who had lived around 500 BC. According to Confucius, a virtuous person's principled behavior will promote social harmony, a fundamental goal. According to Confucius good government will:

"Make the local people happy and attract migrants from afar."

Avoiding war and famine is important. A successful society will be stable and support a large population. By this standard, China was very successful for most of the last two thousand years. All this came to a crashing halt in 1839 when the British East India Company used the British military to force China to allow the British to sell opium in China. By encouraging Chinese to become addicted, the Company could extract great wealth from China. This proved to be only the beginning of European intimidation and exploitation of China, a period Chinese refer to the "Century of Humiliation."

The ability of Europeans to dominate China naturally raised the question among Chinese, "What did we do wrong? What makes the Europeans so powerful?" Chinese Confucians observed that the Europeans appeared to be motivated by a combination of religion, militarism, and greed. These were all familiar enough from Chinese history. Confucius taught that they would fail before Confucian humanism, mostly because people motivated by religion etc. would fight with each other while humanist/Confucians would cooperate. Indeed, the First World War demonstrated to the Chinese, and to many Europeans, the fundamental flaws of European culture.



1898 American Cartoon

Still, the Europeans clearly had something going for them that compensated for their obvious flaws. Most educated Chinese believed that key thing was science, in particular scientific observation of Nature.

The question for many Chinese was, "Can science be integrated into traditional Confucian humanism, or do we need to replace Confucius and humanism entirely?" Chinese liberals, such as Hu Shi, believed that the absence of science from traditional Confucian values was simply a mistake which could be readily corrected. Chinese totalitarians, ultimately led by Mao Zedong, believed a complete repudiation of humanist values was necessary to secure China's safety. In the 1940s Mao won the argument by military conquest. Now that Mao is dead and China no longer so vulnerable, what will the future be? Will Hu Shi's philosophy, Confucius plus science and democracy, revive?

Who was Hu Shi?

Hu Shi (1891-1962) was the child of a tea merchant. An exceptional student, he won a scholarship in 1910 to attend Cornell University in the United States. From 1914 to 1917 he earned a Ph.D. in philosophy at Columbia, where he was enormously influenced by his professor, John Dewey, the educational reformer, pragmatist philosopher and signatory of the first Humanist Manifesto. (Hu studied with Dewey at the same time as B.R. Ambedkar, the great leader of the Dalits of India and the author of the Indian Constitution. Hu and Ambedkar were even in the same class, Dewey's Philosophy 131-132, in the 1915-1916 academic year. Although both were close to Dewey for years, I can find no record of their interaction with each other. Perhaps philosophy students like Hu didn't socialize with economists like Ambedkar. Who knows? But it feels like there is a great story in there somewhere.)



Hu Shi

Even as a student, Hu was a prominent activist. He was particularly devoted to replacing traditional literary Chinese, written in an ancient style, with literature written in the Chinese language people actually spoke. In 1918, one year out of graduate school and back in China, he published his four principles of writing. Hu Shi said:

1. "Speak only when you have something to say."
2. "Speak what you want to say and say it in the way you want to say it."
3. "Speak what is your own and not that of someone else."
4. "Speak in the language of the time in which you live."

Hu's campaign for the use of ordinary speech in literature was enormously successful. Hu immediately became one of China's most respected thinkers. Hu was a leader of the student-led revolutionary movement known as the May 4 movement from the large demonstrations student staged on May 4, 1919 under the slogan "Science and Democracy."



**May 4, 1919 Demonstration for
"Science and Democracy"**

As a leading Chinese intellectual, Hu played a role in inviting a series of prominent non-Chinese humanists to lecture in China. One of the first was his former teacher, John Dewey, who was in China from 1919 to 1921. Other visitors included Albert Einstein, Rabindranath Tagore, Bertrand Russell and Margaret Sanger. Hu translated for Sanger during her live speech before 2,000 people in Shanghai in 1922 and published his translation of her remarks in a major journal.

Like many Europeans disgusted by the bloodshed of the First World War, Russell hoped that Europe could learn humanism from China, writing after his visit to China:

"The distinctive merit of our [British] civilization, I should say, is the scientific method; the distinctive merit of the Chinese is a just conception of the ends of life. It is these two that one must hope to see gradually uniting."



Sanger and Hu

Hu Shi's Philosophy

Personally, Hu Shi was an agnostic. He wrote that his spiritual hero was Thomas Huxley, the English Darwinian, who invented the word "agnostic". But Hu Shi, like his hero John Dewey, believed that people need a sense of religious structure to their lives. Dewey and his Unitarian friends put humanism into Christian form. Dewey's other student, Ambedkar, put Marxism into Buddhist form. Hu Shi put science into Confucian form.

Serious Confucian scholar that he was, Hu Shi cited ancient sources. In the passage below he cites Zhu Xi (1130-1200), the principle architect of the Song dynasty Neo-Confucian revival. The quote is from a lecture Hu Shi delivered in 1944. To make the text clearer, I have used different shadings for the words of Hu Shi, Zhu Xi, and Confucius

Hu is trying to convince his readers that the spirit of scientific investigation is present in Zhu Xi's classical Confucianism. Zhu Xi isn't explicitly advocating scientific controlled experiments, but Hu Shi is trying to convince us that Zhu Xi was heading in the right direction and doing pretty well for someone writing in 1199 CE.

Hu Shi wrote: "There is recorded a remarkable discourse of his [Zhu Xi's], in which the philosopher was so earnest that he seemed quite excited in his eloquence.

'There are the words of the wise men of the past. There are the many truths and principles spread before us. Let us open our minds and study them and see through them. Then we shall be equipped to meet the changes and the novel situations.

'Let us not cling to one little thing.

'Let us learn from the Buddhist monks who travel on foot from place to place, meeting the best minds from all corners of the empire, observing the affairs and conditions of the localities, seeing

the scenery and topography of the mountains and rivers, studying the historical remains of the success and failure, good government and misrule, rise and fall of past governments and dynasties. Then, but not until then, shall we see all sides of the truth.

'For (quoting Confucius) "a scholar who clings to his little place of residence, is disqualifying himself to be a scholar."

'There is never such a thing as attainment of sagehood by means of sitting quiet in a little room, concentrating one's thought on one thing or one idea

'From the time of antiquity to this day, there has never been a sage who does not know the affairs of the world; there has never been a sage who cannot deal with changing and novel situations; and there has never been a sage who shuts himself in a little room and sits idly alone.

'The sage should know all things and understand all things....

'Therefore, Confucius teaches us to learn widely (the Master lays special emphasis on these two words). We should "learn widely, question attentively, think carefully, discuss (debate) clearly, and practice earnestly..."

'In learning, one should aim to learn everything. But for one's understanding, it is necessary to study one thing at a time..."

According to Hu Shi, in interpreting the Confucian injunction to "investigate things" Zhu Xi had in mind two kinds of definition of the scope of "things"

"(1) All things in the world
(2) Book study (Humanistic)

"He [Zhu Xi] frankly devoted his life to the scientific study of the Humanities
But he also made many interesting and fruitful observations on the facts and the phenomena of nature. He said, for example:

'I have noticed shells are found on high mountains, sometimes in rocks. The rocks were the soils of old days, and the shells once lived in the water. The low places have become high and the soft mud has turned into hard rocks.'

"He was thus anticipating Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) by 300 years in understanding the true nature of fossils!"

It is interesting that Hu Shi appears to regret that Zhu Xi, who in Hu Shi's view clearly approved of science, nevertheless devoted himself entirely to the "Humanities." Hu Shi has been criticized for similar reasons, personally devoting much of his life to the study of classical Chinese literature, while many of his followers would have preferred him to play a more aggressively political role.