

The Xueheng School (学衡派), Babbitt's New Humanism, and the May Fourth Movement (五四新文学运动)

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Abstract: In "The Xueheng School (学衡派), Babbitt's New Humanism, and the May Fourth Movement (五四新文学运动)" Li Yi discusses modern Chinese literary history. On the one hand, it is known that scholars have been discussing key figures of the May Fourth Movement by positioning the Xueheng School to the opposite side of the former. Hence in scholarship and criticism the location of the Xueheng School as a restoration group of feudalism resulted in understanding the School as hindering the development of modern culture. However, since the 1990s the Xueheng School inspired interest in the concept of restoring ancient Chinese thought. Some scholars even repeat the ideas of the Xueheng School and regard the efforts of Xueheng scholars as overall and profound cultural pursuits which would diminish some of the extreme ideas of the May Fourth Movement. Li argues that neither of the two views on the Xueheng School are accurate and discusses the Xueheng School's achievements in view of Irving Babbitt's idea of "New Humanism."

Keywords: Xueheng School; Modern Chinese Literature; May Fourth Movement; Irving Babbitt

In modern Chinese literary history, the misadventure of the Xueheng School (学衡派), is dramatic. On the one hand, scholars and critics have been following the criticism of key figures of the May Fourth Movement (五四新文学运动) putting the Xueheng School as a different and opposite movement suggesting that the School was a restoration group of the ancient feudalism which would hinder the development of the modern culture and even as some kind of dark forces implicated with the political persecution committed by reactionary warlords. On the other hand, since 1990s the Xueheng school inspired a rise of concern with culturally conservative thought. Some scholars even repeated the ideas of this School and regarded the efforts of the Xueheng scholars as the overall and profound cultural pursuits which would get rid of the extreme ideas of the

May Fourth Movement. In the early 1920s, the participants of various schools of literary movements bear different cultural and political backgrounds and as a result, their evaluations of literature and their anticipation of the future are various.

The advocacy of Confucius's thought and the study of the Confucian canon appeared before the May Fourth Movement, whose appearance marked the beginning of support for anti-feudal sentiments and a move away from traditional intellectual elitism while at the same time in support of nationalist thinking and sentiments. The most notable difference between intellectuals and advocates of Confucius's thought and traditionalism is that followers of Confucius explored the problems as intellectuals and did not mix politics with scholarship and academic activities. Lin Shu was among the first who publicly critiqued the May Fourth Movement while his large-scale translation activities assisted those who were in favor to keep the foundations of traditional Chinese literature. What is surprising is that when Lin felt that he had no alternatives to solve his resentment of the advocators of the May Fourth Movement, he reported this hatred to those who are in power, which is exactly another deeply hidden ignoble political awareness of traditional Chinese intellectuals. And if the once existed political enthusiasm did not harm the strict academic explorations of Zhang Binlin, Huang Kan, and others, Zhang Shizhao -- someone who has also been in the political revolution -- combined his cultural activities into political activities in politics and in 1925 Zhang Shizhao resumed the publication of *Jia Yin* as the chief law officer and the minister of education of the Duan Qirui provisional government. In the history of new Chinese literature, this reactionary magazine has been functioning as a semi-official newspaper with its destiny being controlled by those in power.

Wu Mi, Hu Xiansu, Mei Guangdi, Liu Boming, Tang Yongtong, Chen Yinge, Zhang Yinlin, and Guo Bin were writers and intellectuals who studied abroad and whose Western education was different and more extensive from that of Yan Fu and Zhang Shizhao. Compared to advocates of Confucius's thought, members of the Xueheng School were free from stifling political sentiments. For example, Hu Xiansu believed Hu Shi's writing was dead literature and even criticized all the vernacular poems at that time as reckless, careless, and negatively extreme. Members of the Xueheng School were also pondering on aspects of new culture and

new literature and were probing the development of the culture and literature of the century. They did not just oppose all new and creative literary movements and almost all members of the Xueheng School expounded their anticipated new literature and new culture when criticizing the current new literary movement, even though their ideas were pretty much the same or similar. The reason why the Xueheng School bears resemblance to the May Fourth Movement is that the forces supporting their literary thinking and practice were not from traditional thinking and practices, but based on the anticipation of developing aspects of Western culture and literature. Several key figures of the Xueheng School have been Harvard students (e.g., Wu Mi, Mei Guangdi, Hu Xiansu, Tang Yongtong) and many of them have been students of Irving Babbitt (1865-1933) whose "new humanism" was adopted and propagated by his former students.

The Xueheng School was an ideological and cultural group of Chinese intellectuals and writers and their disagreement with the thought of members of the May Fourth Movement relates to concerns about humanism and the utilitarian aims of the Enlightenment (see, e.g., Li). Babbitt's thought was to carry forward the humanism of ancient Greece, Roman culture, and the Renaissance. His students from China endeavored to seek the spirit of Western humanism within traditional Chinese culture and were trying to combine aspects of Chinese and Western cultures in order to arrive at a worldwide new culture (see, e.g., Li). Babbitt's humanism was to reestablish rationality, to pursue harmony, and to repel the materialism and sensual indulgences of the early twentieth century. In China, owing to differences in traditional practices of culture, there were different understandings of humanism. If we regard the Xueheng School as humanism and the May Fourth Movement as Enlightenment, we would neglect the fact that advocates of the May Fourth Movement often also expressed thought similar to what members of the Xueheng School argued. Some scholars differentiated the Xueheng School and the May Fourth Movement from the perspective of their attitudes towards traditional culture and proposed that the former showed more affirmation while the latter brought forward more criticism. However, in my opinion this differentiation is superficial just like the analysis of some scholars of Wu Mi's work: "Concerning the selection of Confucian doctrines, he [Wu Mi] remained mute about his own opinion but in fact, he secretly carried

on his own work. For example, the 'three cardinal guides' [ruler guides subject, father guides son, husband guides wife, etc.] as the code of Confucianism means importance in Wu Mi's system of universal culture. And from all works of Wu Mi, we can find that his ideas are inconsistent with the 'three cardinal guides.' Yet, he never criticized the 'guides' in public" (Xu 150). While members of the May Fourth Movement launched "liberation movements," members of the Xueheng School opted for sorting out movements meaning they were less aggressive about the undertaking. In my opinion, the view that the May Fourth Movement thoroughly cast away traditional culture and insisted only on putting forward Westernization is not consistent with historical facts. Those who were engaged in the new literary movement were well-educated and they have never given up research of traditional culture and they have never concealed their personal interest in historical traditions. Advocates of the Xueheng School and May Fourth Movement both attached importance to traditional Chinese culture and literature. On this perspective, it is unnecessary and impossible to put them in opposite camps. Their differences are the specific aims and importance of the traditional cultivation of literature in the practice of literary creation. Members of the May Fourth Movement had profound understanding of the actual situation of modern Chinese literature and many writers took presenting their traditional cultivation of knowledge as their top priority instead of excising their creativity. Members of the Xueheng School insisted that traditional cultivation should be employed directly into literary creation so as to make contemporary literature the real inheritance of Chinese culture. In consequence, what members of the May Fourth Movement criticized as the imitation of the ancients became the basic position of members of the Xueheng School. The difference between the impartiality of the Xueheng School and the radicalness of the May Movement is manifested in two ways: the understanding of literary creation and Western culture with the question whether the development of modern Chinese literature should be based on inheritance (tradition) or innovation (Western culture). In my opinion, the Xueheng School's approach was based on inheritance and hence more comprehensive while that of the May Fourth Movement was more subjective and radical.

The development of human culture will emerge as a process of evolution which is the interaction of new and old cultures making culture

itself more combined and integrated. Whether it is radical or not is actually a matter of degree in the shifting and combining of these new and old elements: the aim is to stimulate creation and vitality while preserving the appropriate stability of the cultural system itself. In the development of culture, there are many and varied problems to be solved and the ways to tackle them also vary widely. Therefore, the degree we are talking about here is not a specific one. That is to say, there is no absolutely unchangeable degree and no impartial and fixed standard. We always attempt to combine the quintessence of the past and present and to obtain the treasures of Chinese and Western cultures. Even for the existence of radicalness we need to discuss is not an abstract and theoretical problem. All in all, in developing culture, the matter of degree should be in line with the actual facts of the development itself. That is why Lu Xun believed, on the one hand, that a "Wise man possesses penetrating perception of the world situation. He can weigh the pros and cons, cast away bias and prejudice so as to achieve the essence of others and to further adequately employ which to his own nation" (Lu, "Cultural" 56). On the other hand, Lu Xun acknowledged the fact that "reviewing all the accomplishments of today, none is developed without the help of the past achievements, which denotes that culture is doomed to change, or to be against what used to be accepted. As a result, culture could not be developed without preferences" (Lu, "Cultural" 46). Today, in commenting on the radicalness of the May Fourth Movement, we should be first clear about what kind of cultural phenomenon we are dealing with, what is its nature, and what the characteristics are of its development. Further, when we perform an evaluation the May Fourth Movement, we should ascertain that it is a movement whose values should be illustrated in practical experiences. Although we have already established a theoretical framework under the foundation of the literary creation, literary creation must prove its existence and achievement with the creation itself. Literary theories, literary history, and literary criticism are just a kind of sorting and integrating for literature by people's values according to the objective and external surroundings and the need of the society.

I argue that theories emanating from the Xueheng School with knowledge of Chinese and Western culture and literature are the comprehensive understanding of literary phenomena at hand. Looking closely into the relationship between the members of Xueheng School and

literature, they tend to do better in literary theories than in literary creations. Although Hu Xiansu and Mei Guangdi are poets of the Southern Society and Wu Fangji is renowned, Wu Mi has engaged in innovative poetry. However, the literary creation of Hu, Mei, and Wu are still within the bounds of traditional literature which has already achieved success and has been a unbreakable base for literary developments. The glory of the past actually impedes the creative ability of the Xueheng School's members. I do not mean to depreciate the artistic talents of Wu Mi and his colleagues, but find it hard to agree with the flattery within the circle of Xueheng School's members. Wu Mi praised Wu Fangji's poetry that "it could inspire new ideas in the current literary situation and would be remembered by the generations to come" (1392). More importantly, Xueheng members whose unfamiliarity prevented them from getting sufficient literary evidence for their production were actually alien to the creative ideas of the May Fourth Movement. There is a general phenomenon of Xueheng's criticism of the May Fourth Movement: theoretically broad and profound and forceful while insufficient. For some essays, there are even no examples of specific content of the writings which are critiqued.

In the face of new-born literature, a writer to establish self-independence after the existence of literature of thousands of years is not to tackle the fundamental principles of literature, but to utilize the fresh materials to express himself/herself who may adore Shakespeare or Du Fu, then Shakespeare and Du Fu could probably become his lifetime gift of literary heritage. Nonetheless, when he/she strikes to seek for real self-existence, he/she has to forget about this masters, "if the path-breakers fail to cast away all the traditional ideas and practices, China could not see the coming of the real and new literature" (Lu, "The Tomb" 241). This is exactly the basic difference between literary creation and general literary theories. The Xueheng School's criticisms of literary evolution earned a favorable reception in recent years. Indeed, the production of spiritual wealth is dramatically different from that of the biological species (not to speak of the various already existed opinions on the evolution of the biological species). In the May Fourth Movement, the influence of evolution is obvious. However, the Xueheng School did not really carefully study the special case of the May Fourth Movement. Just like what some scholars have pointed out, "the idea of 'revolution' doesn't exist

as scientific truth for the members of the May Fourth New Literary School, but rather a kind of moral order; when they are confronted with the conflicts of the historical process and this 'moral order,' passion to criticize becomes much stronger and severer. The order appears as the challenger and accuser of the traditional culture and the social orders. It is no longer a theory of nature, but rather an imperative law attempting to guide people's thoughts and beliefs" (Wang 16-17). Naturally, literary creation becomes the most forceful weapon to express this stronger passion. As a result, the May Fourth Movement has never produced a compelling theoretical system about literary evolution and the moral orders are just the contemporarily moral support for the breaking of the old literary pattern. Only those who are deeply engaged in the literary activities could detect the gap between theory and the reality.

All in all, in breaking the old literary patterns and establishing new literary styles, the descriptive words used by members of the May Fourth Movement are indeed not as impartial and objective as those of the Xueheng School. Nevertheless, literary creation is all about art in the first place and for writers of new literary creation descriptive words can never influence their borrowing and learning from their literary heritage of the China or the West, nor become the impediments of their creative writings. The members of the May Fourth Movement are admittedly radical, but it is exactly their radicalness that generated the considerable literary treasure. As for literature, a practical activity, the accomplishment of the art itself is the precise criterion to see whether it is radical or not. Further, with their pursuit of justice Xueheng School's opposition towards the radicalness of the May Fourth Movement reflects their attitudes towards Western culture and literature. About the May Fourth Movement, members of the Xueheng School thought that the ideas they hold and the information they have at hand are mostly radical, the materials of their writings are mainly from the thoughts and articles of one school in the late Western history which are considered to be useless. Yet, they take them as the representative of Western culture. And the standpoint of Xueheng School is to gain an overall view of literature and to bring in the culture of the West. The master pieces of each school must be read and studied. This cultural holism is to some extent valuable and if we take into consideration the fickleness pervading the twentieth century, Chinese literature and the frequently seen literary utilitarianism, we would find the assumptions of

the Xueheng School is correct and profound insight that really made the point. Nonetheless, the target was not quite accurate at that time. Because no matter from the point of cultural history or literary history, the fickleness of twentieth century appeared after the mid-twentieth century, which is the right time of the beginning of the May Fourth Movement when its pioneers displayed a unprecedented overall acceptance to the change. The literary thoughts and cultural thoughts for about several centuries after the Renaissance were digested and sorted out in China in a few years, and proved that people of that generation did not have much bias. Certainly, owing to the differences of personal interests, they have their preferences of the introductions of the Western thought such as Hu Shi's and Chen Duxiu's introductions to realism, Guo Moruo's introductions to Romanticism, Mao Dun's introductions to naturalism, Lu Xun's introductions to northern European literature and Russian literature, Zhou Zuoren's introductions to Japanese literature, and so on. It is natural that all these preferences reflect the personal pursuit of arts of different writers. If the ideal of the Xueheng School is considered to be literary holism, then great minds that the May Fourth Movement displayed are the vivid manifestations said literary holism. My next question is about the Xueheng School's criticisms of the May Fourth Movement: members of the Xueheng School were opposing Western theories and in consequence they introduced Western literatures of before the nineteenth century. As a result, Xueheng members believed that Romanticism was of severe limitation and that realism and naturalism of the second half of the nineteenth underwent a decline. Therefore, if the country yearns for new literature, they must thoroughly learn through realism and naturalism of the second half of the nineteenth century. Under the guide of this logic and with the highlights of the May Fourth Movement as romanticism, realism, naturalism of the nineteenth century and modernism of the twentieth, the question arises why they were determined to be "radical."

The Xueheng School's acceptance of Babbitt's thought is as reasonable and inevitable as the May Fourth Movement's acceptance of their approaches. Nevertheless, the members of the Xueheng School never admitted their own preference or even tried to regard this preference as the whole or the quintessence of culture. Thus, these efforts become the real problems: at the very least, they violated the objective and impartiality that they were looking for. Lu Xun pointed out Xueheng's failure to justify

itself and while Lu Xun did not deny efforts of scholarly exploration, later when compiling his literary history, others were criticizing these comments. To reevaluate the Xueheng School, we should renew research so as to see that there were such intellectuals who have made contributions to the exploration of modern culture. Indeed, in the perspective of new literature, they brought Chinese literature into the landscape of world literature together with those of the May Fourth Movement. In addition, attempts have been made to provide standards for scholarly debates ignored by some new writers who were too busy engaging in literary innovation.

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Bioprofile

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