



Liang Shu-ming



Hu Shih

Göttinger Vorträge zum modernen China

In Conflict with Western Rationality: A Study of Modern Chinese Intellectual History

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Abstract

In the process of modernization, Enlightenment rationality plays a central role. Modern science and technology, market economy, division of labor, bureaucracy, rule of law, democracy, ideas of liberty, universal human rights and individualism are inseparable from the Enlightenment that is deeply rooted in the Western intellectual tradition. A new world view and mode of thinking based on Enlightenment rationality is something that the Chinese had to face in their search for modernity.

The Chinese, however, also have highly developed and sophisticated world views and modes of thinking characterized by Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist traditions. Traditional Chinese thinkers tend to see notions of time, order, human nature, ethics and the idea of rationality itself in ways quite different from the modern West. Therefore, it is natural that the meeting of the two civilizations will lead to conflicts. The majority of Chinese intellectuals tried to adopt Western rationality in order to modernize China. However, there were also some Chinese intellectuals who questioned Enlightenment rationality from a traditional point of view.

I will examine representative figures from both conservative and modernist camps. The first one is a leading conservative named Liang Shu-ming (1893-1988). Among all the cultural conservatives during the New Culture Movement period (1915-1927), Liang was the first one to provide an overall and penetrating criticism and reappraisal of Western rationality and modernity itself.

The second one is Hu Shih (1891-1962), the most important advocator of science and democracy in modern China. Influenced by John Dewey's philosophy, Hu interpreted science and democracy from a Pragmatist point of view. The paradox of Hu Shih lies in the fact that although he intended to modernize China, his understanding of the core of Western modernity seems to be quite problematic and that he did not realize that his cosmological, epistemological and ethical position was very close to the tradition he wanted to discard.