

Hu Shih and the May 4th Movement*

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I

In 1900, the imperialist powers Japan, Russia, the United States, Great Britain, France, Austria, Italy and Germany joined forces to invade China. Together with the reactionary Manchu Government, they suppressed the heroic 'Yi Ho Tuan' (Boxers) movement. After massacring and looting Chinese people, they further demanded 45 millions taels of silver as 'war indemnity'.

However, the Chinese people were undaunted in face of the plunder of the imperialists, and their spirit of resistance burned even brighter, to the dismay of the plunderers. In 1906, an imperialist who had been active in China for many years proposed to the American Government that, by allocating the 'war indemnity' to a scholarship fund to send Chinese students to the US, the US Government could produce a group of 'talents' who would be loyal in the service of US aggression in China—indeed a clever way of controlling the development of China and its leadership.

In other words, this was a proposal to make use of the money seized at gun point in exchange for things that could not be won by guns. This

scheme of cultural aggression was soon approved by the US Government and was launched in 1909.

A Young Man in the Dark

In July 1910, a list of the successful contestants for the 'indemnity' scholarships of that year was posted in Shihchia Hutung, a street in Peking. Crowds gathered around the notice-board all day and it was not until night time that they dispersed. Then, a speeding rickshaw suddenly stopped in front of the notice-board. Out jumped a youth in his twenties, who, after making sure there was no one around, went up nervously to the notice. With the help of a rickshaw light, he read the list of names from the bottom upwards, and gave a sigh of relief at the sight of the name 'Hu Shih'. Smirking with satisfaction, he stepped into the rickshaw and was again on his way.

He was Hu Hung-hsing. He gave himself the name of Hu Shih for the purpose of this examination.

Hu Shih was born of a bureaucrat-merchant-landlord family in the province of Anhwei. After nine years of feudal education in his home village, he found himself in Shanghai in 1904. There he studied for some time, and then did some teaching. During this period, he acquired a fair measure of the ideology of the comprador capitalists, and

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found 'truth' in the writings of capitalist reformists, namely that the Chinese nation was inferior to the Western nations. He worshipped the imperialist 'adventurers' he came into contact with, striving to imitate them in every way. Later, he became a close friend of a German teacher who shared practically everything with him—from drinking and gambling to prostitute-seeking. One night in the spring of 1910, Hu got drunk and was thrown into jail for getting into a brawl.

After being castigated and fined five dollars for the offence, he was freed. While nursing his wounds, Hu Shih stared at the bruised face in his mirror with remorse. A line from a poem crossed his mind: 'Heaven must have some design for a talent such as mine.' This, reportedly, was what inspired him to great expectations, marking a turning point in his life. After considerable thought, he decided that the ideal step for him to take was to study in the United States. He thereupon locked himself in and buried his head in books for a month in preparation for the examination.

But alas, there were other worries: if he failed, wouldn't he become the laughing stock of his friends and relatives? In order to 'save face' in such a case, he finally decided to change his name for the examination. His brother, a merchant, suggested the word 'Shih' which means 'fit', inspired by the theory of the 'survival of the fittest'. Hu was delighted with the suggestion. To him, this examination was the gamble of his lifetime, and the pressure it bore on him was so great that he dared not come to see the results in daytime. It surprised him that his essay on 'What Confucius said' had been given full marks. Therefore, although he was not good in the other subjects, he managed to squeeze his way up to the 55th place among 70 contestants, and became one among the group chosen for study in the US.

Thus began the making of an imperialist protege.

The Golden World

On August 16, 1910, Hu Shih left Shanghai and headed for the US to begin his studies in agriculture at Cornell University.

America, in the early 20th century, had become an outright imperialist country. Lenin once said with insight: 'On one side there is a small number of ruthless millionaires drowning themselves in a hedonistic lifestyle, while on the other side, the masses of proletariat are struggling for survival.' But, in the eyes of Hu Shih, this land was the 'golden world'. He fell head over heels in love with everything American, especially the 'materialistic culture' of capitalism built on the blood and sweat of the working people. He extolled the glamour of American life, such as family picnics in spacious parks and sparkling evening gowns at dinner parties. It did not take long for Hu to draw a conclusion: 'In this land, there is nothing that cannot be accomplished by the wisdom of man.'

Apparently, Hu was not interested in studying agriculture. Instead, he was working hard on getting 'Americanized'. He recalled that, the first time he attended a football match, he was shocked by the crude manners of the crowds. He felt that such behaviour was 'below the dignity of college students.' However, his timidity was soon overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of the throng and he too joined in the cheering. In his own words, 'it was the spirit and optimism of the Americans' that had loosened his restraints. In fact, his nine years of education in Confucianism was gradually being thawed by a bourgeois comprador ideology.

In his third year in the US, Hu switched from agriculture to Liberal Arts. He believed that the Philosophy Department at Cornell was the 'stronghold of idealism' and he further moulded his reactionary political philosophy under this influence. On his graduation in 1914, Hu composed a song entitled 'The Sleeping

Beauty—the Future of My Motherland' which laid bare his attachment to American imperialism and his own comprador philosophy. In the song, China was depicted as the 'Sleeping Beauty' who was awakened by a knight who later married her. At her awakening from her long sleep the 'beauty' found that the outside world had changed. She sent her servants out for new clothes, and the happy ending came when she dressed herself up in the latest fashion, and hailed the knight with 'Long live my lord!'

Obviously, American imperialism was the lord, and China was 'married' or, more exactly, 'sold' to him. This had obviously become Hu's dream for his country, and for the realization of that dream Hu Shih throughout his life willingly served as one of the 'servants' who bought the mistress her new dresses.

Opposing Patriotic Students

A month after Hu completed the song, the Japanese imperialists made their '21 Demands' on China in January 1915. It was part of their frantic attempt to dominate China—politically and economically—while the Western powers were preoccupied with their own war.

The unreasonable demands of the Japanese aroused tremendous outrage among the Chinese people. Chinese students in America called special discussion groups on the matter and despatched protest telegrams, hoping to find a way to save their country. Hu received a notice to such a meeting on March 1 but he walked out in the middle of the session and left a note saying: 'We are so far away from the motherland, and there is pitifully nothing we can do to help her. Squabbling can serve no purpose but will only distract us from our studies. Sending letters and telegrams cannot help our troubled country. We'd better handle the matter calmly.'

However, people did not listen to his advice, and the patriotic activities con-

tinued. Hu, angered, published 'An Open Letter to Overseas Chinese Intellectuals' in English, publicly accusing his fellow students engaged in the patriotic activities of being 'senseless and close to madness.' According to him, the correct way was to 'fulfil our duty—to study.'

This public letter met with strong opposition from the Chinese students in the US. People criticized Hu for being 'heartless' and furtively working for a 'merger between Japan and China.'

While this heated argument was going on, Yuan Shih-hai, whose ambition was to become the new emperor of China, continued to look to the imperialists for support. With the approval of the US Government, he put his signature to the '21 Demands'. Immediately, Hu exalted this action as having set 'an unprecedented' example in China's diplomacy. In her dealings with Japan, he said, China had held a correct understanding of herself and her enemy and she was cautious and firm, flexible yet unbending. Hu said that his optimism had not been dented. Amidst the anger and indignation of the Chinese people, he wrote a paper on 'Optimism', which won him a prize of US\$50.

Hu's attitude towards the '21 Demands' further exposed his reactionary political position. Some overseas students began to publicly label him a 'traitor' and Hu, in order to curry favour with the imperialists, shamelessly recorded this in his memoirs.

From Pragmatism to Literary Reform

That same autumn, Hu moved on to Columbia University to study philosophy. The department was then headed by John Dewey, whose pragmatism soon became Hu's professed faith.

Pragmatism negates the objective existence of matter, negates the objective truth and believes that truth is only a 'convenient tool' to 'deal with the environment.' This reactionary, subjective trend

of philosophy inevitably leads to the advocacy of imperialism and reformism in opposition to people's revolutionary movements. Hu Shih realized that the most practical tool to stop the revolution in China was to adopt pragmatism and get China 'married' to the knight of American imperialism as soon as possible.

'Mr Dewey taught me how to think,' Hu often said devoutly. He plunged headlong into the study of pragmatism and acted according to it. The first action he took was to apply pragmatism to literature. However, the ancient style of Chinese writing was neither practical nor suitable for propagating pro-Western comprador ideology and culture. In February 1916, Hu had an 'inspiration'—he was determined to promote the vernacular Chinese.

Hu Shih began to draw other Chinese students abroad into discussions on the difference between the 'dead literature' and the 'living literature'. Letters and poems written in the new style were frequently exchanged and it soon became a fad. Among Chinese students overseas there were some die-hard feudalists such as Mei Kuang-ti who opposed Hu's ideas. A debate in light vein ensued between them, through which Hu gained much publicity. There were others who were dissatisfied with Hu's focusing on the style of writing rather than its content. For example, one of Hu's friends wrote him: 'It is useless to argue on the difference in styles.'

This 'friend' of Hu's who wished that Hu would concentrate on content rather than form was a little too naive. For the comprador bourgeois class, like the imperialists, was in no mood to bring any thorough change to the feudal culture and ideology. In the interest of their class, the anti-feudalism of the bourgeois comprador could only propose some reform in the style of feudalistic writing. By pushing for gradual reform, Hu Shih was smarter than Mei and in knowing how to confine such a reform to what

his class interests could allow, Hu was more cunning than his 'friend'.

What then was the extent of Hu Shih's 'literary reform'? He explained:

In the written language, there is no difference between the old and new, but the living and the dead.

The ancients called it 'yu' (desire), we call it 'yao'.

The ancients called it 'chih' (arrive), we call it 'tao'.

The ancients called it 'niao' (urinate), we call it 'niao' (a different character but the same pronunciation as for the first 'niao'—Translator).

That was all there was to it!

Up to this point, Hu was only sowing his seed among the Chinese students in the US. But his real concern was inside China. Subsequently, he wrote to the editor of the *New Youth* magazine in October of 1916, and made his eight-point suggestions for literary reform. His article on 'Preliminary Recommendations for Literary Reform' was published in the January 1917 issue of *New Youth*. The eight points he raised were that literature should (1) have content, (2) not copy ancient scholars, (3) be grammatically correct, (4) not make empty complaints, (5) avoid clichés, (6) not use classical allusions, (7) not adopt the classical couplets, and (8) not avoid colloquial expressions.

Later on, he named these eight points the 'eight don'ts'. According to Hu, their sole purpose was 'to create a national literary style for China.' So what Hu meant by literary reform was nothing more than the adoption of the vernacular, or *paihua*.

When Hu's article incorporating his recommendations for literary reform was published, the cultural and ideological front in China was undergoing a significant change. A few bourgeois democrats who had experienced the failure of the 1911 Revolution began to see the need for an ideological revolution for the reform of the 'national character'. They

were against the traditional values and culture of feudalism as represented by Confucianism. At the beginning of 1917, Tsai Yuan-pei, a liberal, became the Rector of Peking University. He appointed Chen Tu-hsiu, a bourgeois progressive, as the Dean of Liberal Arts and Li Ta-chao, the librarian. Tsai requested Chen to continue the publication of the year-old magazine *New Youth* at the university. Thus with *New Youth* and the Liberal Arts Department as a centre, a cultural movement was initiated. The emergence of Hu's article coincided with these developments but it served an entirely different purpose. He was only active in the promotion of *paihua*, despite his later claims that he and several Chinese students in the US had first conceived the movement. It is quite incredible that such a movement could have been conceived by someone living thousands of miles away.

Homecoming

In May 1917, Hu was completing his studies in the United States. He was very busy at that time discussing *paihua* and making speeches everywhere. He talked about 'how American assistance could help the development of China', and appealed to the imperialists to send more aid. At the same time, he was working on his doctoral thesis: 'History of the Progress of Ancient Chinese Philosophical Methodology.'

On May 22, after going through a two-hour oral examination conducted by Dewey, Hu Shih obtained his Ph.D. Upon the fulfilment of his life's dream, Hu was prepared to go home. On May 29, he went to say good-bye to Dewey. The teacher said, 'My concern for international affairs far surpasses other matters. If you ever write any papers on the Far East situation, mail them to me. I'll place them in appropriate publications.' Immensely grateful, Hu noted this down in his diary.

He left New York on June 9 and returned to Ithaca, where he had first landed in America. He met a great number of friends who were like 'relatives and brothers to him.' Hu wrote of his departure with moving sentiments: 'My home town is where my friends are. Most of my friends are in America. I am leaving my home town and returning to my parents' country, but I cannot tell whether I'm bitter or happy about this trip.'

Nevertheless, the journey home had to be made. Otherwise all the expectations the imperialists had in him would be in vain. On the 21st of that same month, he boarded the *Japanese Queen* for home.

Aboard the ship, he met a Japanese who told him that a British publisher was about to publish an 'Everyman's Library' in which two well-known Chinese works were to be included. He asked Hu for some suggestions. Hu immediately answered: 'Writings of Confucius should be the first choice, and they should include *The Book of Odes*, the *Four Classics* and the *Book on Filial Duties*.'

'Would you like to be the translator and editor?' the man asked. 'Of course,' Hu promised eagerly, 'This is an important task and it is valuable for education.' This became his first academic assignment after he left the United States.

The weather was gloomy and it was not until two weeks after he first boarded the ship that the moon appeared. In the moonlight Hu composed a poem in the traditional Chinese style which ended: 'Talking to myself by the railing, I ask myself where indeed my homeland is.' He was not sure whether America or China was his homeland. He almost let slip the sentence: 'I am not a Chinese.'

II

Life as a Professor

Hu Shih arrived in Shanghai on July 10, 1917, and was given a teaching post

in Peking University two months later. At the end of the year he returned to his home village to get married, and afterwards took his bride to Peking.

As he travelled up and down the country, all he could feel was dissatisfaction.

He was dissatisfied, not because China was getting deeper and deeper into the mire of semi-colonialism and semi-feudalism, and not because the burden of the Chinese people was getting heavier and heavier. It was for a totally different reason.

He browsed through the English books in Shanghai bookstores, but discovered they were all on subjects dated before the 19th century, totally 'unrelated to the new trends of thought in Europe and America.'

He once came across an English language teacher who had not even heard of the names of some contemporary American and European writers.

In his home town he met a secondary school student who was not only unfamiliar with the English alphabet, but could not even tell the difference between English and Japanese. . . .

All this depressed Hu Shih: for China to adopt the 'new thinking in the West' preached by Dewey seemed to be an impossible task! The realization of his pet theory of China married to the United States was still far away!

He vowed that for the next 20 years he would wash his hands of politics, and devote his time to the casting of a new base for art and culture in China. In other words, he would first build up a cultural base for the comprador bourgeois ideology before he unveiled the political motives behind it.

Thus Hu Shih appeared as a 'young scholar' on the platform of Peking University. His essays on cultural reform had attracted some youths at the time.

Hu Shih was the professor of the history of Chinese philosophy. This course was originally taught by Chen Po-tao. But his method was so outdated and boring that the students almost died of ennui. Hu Shih was different. He was much more aware of the fact that philosophical history could serve the purpose of the 'struggle' of the time. Right after he took over the course, he drew up a new curriculum and concentrated on the philosophical schools in the periods of 'Spring and Autumn' and 'Warring States'. His exposition was more lucid and down-to-earth than Chen's, which was indeed a refreshing experience for his students.

But actually, what Hu Shih taught was only a distorted version of Chinese philosophy. For example, on the two-line struggle of the period in the field of philosophy, he consistently sided with Confucianism to denounce Legalism. Rounding off his lectures on Confucianism, he said passionately:

'After reading the material we have on Confucius, I can't help feeling admiration for his spirit and vitality. He was rich in historical, cultural and artistic precepts, and from the work he has done we can tell that he was indeed a great and broad-minded man.'

But what Hu reserved for the school of Legalism was far from admiration. He attacked it as extreme utilitarianism and was especially vicious against the suppression of Confucians and the destruction of their books carried out by Chin Shih-huang, the first emperor of China, himself a Legalist.

In order to widen his influence, Hu Shih compiled and published a year later his lectures in book form under the title *An Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy, Volume One*.

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