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# On Wu Mi's Conservatism

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Although broad tendencies that may be labeled “conservative” can be traced throughout history, to categorize any group of intellectuals as “conservative” is to invite philosophical debate. Karl Mannheim maintained that conservatism as an “ism” only emerged in the West in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and was an inseparable component of the triad conservatism/liberalism/radicalism.<sup>1</sup> Benjamin I. Schwartz went further. Referring to such prominent figures as Edmund Burke, he argued that “it is often asserted that conservatism was a reaction to the French Revolution, but it is probably more correct to say that the doctrine of conservatism rose in dialectic reaction to certain trends of the Enlightenment.”<sup>2</sup> However complex the concept of conservatism may be, it should not be studied in isolation but regarded as a reaction to certain movements characterized by the intention to change the old system.

*The  
“Critical  
Review”  
school.*

Although it is probably impossible to provide an incontrovertible definition of “conservatism,” the term is both convenient and useful for evaluating the thought of a special group of early twentieth century Chinese intellectuals widely known as the “Critical Review” (CR hereafter) or Xueheng school. CR was a monthly journal first published in 1922 by certain members of the faculty of the

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Mannheim “Conservative Thought,” in Paul Kecskemeti, ed., *Essays on Sociology and Social Psychology* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul Ltd., 1966), 98-99.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin I. Schwartz, “Notes on Conservatism in General and in China in Particular,” in Charlotte Furth, ed., *The Limits of Change: Essays on Conservative Alternatives in Republican China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 5.

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Southeastern University in Nanjing. This school of thought was conservative in that it directly opposed the New Cultural Movement (xin wenhua yundong) led by such famous thinkers as Hu Shi (1891-1962), Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), Li Dazhao (1889-1927), and Lu Xun (1881-1936). Among the CR scholars, Wu Mi was certainly the most active. Moreover, he was the chief editor of most issues of the journal, which remained in publication until its demise, after eleven years of bitter struggle, in 1933.<sup>3</sup>

Wu Mi graduated from Tsinghua University in 1916. In the following year, he went to the United States to study at Harvard, from which he obtained an A.M. degree in 1921. While at Harvard, he had the opportunity to study with Irving Babbitt (1865-1933), one of the leading thinkers in the West during the first third of the twentieth century. Wu Mi was fascinated by Babbitt's ideas, which were known as the New Humanism, and by Babbitt's respect for ancient Eastern philosophy, including Buddhism and Confucianism. Other prominent CR scholars who were taught by Babbitt or influenced by his work include Mei Guangdi (1880-1945), Hu Xiansu (b1894), Liu Yizheng (1880-1936), and Guo Binhe (?).

*Influenced by  
Babbitt.*

After graduation, Wu Mi returned to China. He immediately confronted a situation in which supporters of the New Cultural Movement were attacking Confucianism and other forms of traditional thought, also known as "national essence," as the origin of evil and the source of China's backwardness. Believing that the destruction of the "national essence" would be harmful to China, Wu Mi soon engaged in resistance to the ideas of the New Cultural Movement.

### *The New Cultural Movement*

According to Chow Tse-tsung, the New Cultural Movement, also known as the May Fourth Movement, covered a period from about 1917 through 1921. The students and intellectual leaders in this group (henceforth designated as the "New Intellectuals"), supported by the rising patriotic and anti-Great Power sentiments of the public, promoted an anti-Japanese campaign and a vast modernization movement that aimed to build a new China through in-

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<sup>3</sup> It was only in 1931, when Wu Mi was on a trip to Europe, that Hu Jixian assumed the position of acting chief editor. See Qiao Yanguan, "Preface of the Republished Critical Review" (Chongyin Xueheng Zazhi Bianyan), CR, 1931.

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tellectual and social reforms.<sup>4</sup> For the New Intellectuals, modernization involved two crucial elements, science and democracy, which were absent from the traditional culture. They thus regarded the introduction of Western culture into China as the most urgent task.

*“Science”  
as a god.* The overwhelming zeal for science, however, did not really facilitate the true spirit of scientific research. Instead, as various scholars have pointed out, the primary concern of the New Intellectuals was to use “science” as a weapon to attack traditional beliefs and philosophy. They venerated science to such an extent that it became a virtual god, an entity beyond doubt or criticism.<sup>5</sup> The worship of science nurtured a strong current of “scientism,” which vastly overrated the usefulness of science. As Daniel Kwok put it:

Conditions during the first half of the twentieth century in China discouraged the wholesale application of science but encouraged an intellectual appreciation of it, which we may call “scientism.” Scientism, in general, assumes that all aspects of the universe are knowable through the methods of science. Proponents of the scientific outlook in China were not always scientists or even philosophers of science. They were intellectuals interested in using science, and the values and assumptions to which it had given rise, to discredit and eventually to replace a traditional body of values. Scientism can thus be considered as the tendency to use the respectability of science in areas having little bearing on science itself.<sup>6</sup>

*Two kinds of  
naturalism.* The scientific misuse of science was first displayed systematically and massively in the writings of Yen Fu (1853-1921). Drawing parallels with Darwin’s Theory of Evolution, Yen Fu warned the Chinese that they could be eliminated if they were not sufficiently competitive in the modern world, much as, according to Darwin, the weaker species are eliminated by natural selection in the natural world. Yen Fu was applying the law of nature to human society. In many ways, Yen Fu’s thought was consistent with the naturalis-

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<sup>4</sup> Chow Tse-tung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 1-2. It is important to note that the May Fourth Incident, though related, is different from the May Fourth Movement. The May Fourth Incident refers to the students’ demonstration in Beijing on May 4, 1919.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Wang Ermin, *On the History of Modern Chinese Thought* (Zhongguo Jindai Sixiangshi Lun) (Taipei: Huashi Publishing, 1977), 531-32.

<sup>6</sup> D. W. Y. Kwok, *Scientism in Chinese Thought 1900-1950* (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1971), 3.

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tic way of thinking that attained great influence in the United States in the nineteenth century. In the view of Irving Babbitt, Utilitarianism and Romanticism, initiated by Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) respectively, were the two streams of thought most representative of naturalism. The former affirmed that human happiness could be obtained through the manipulation of the laws of nature. In the words of Babbitt, Baconianism “always will encourage the substitution of a kingdom of man for the traditional Kingdom of God—the exaltation of material over spiritual ‘comfort,’ the glorification of man’s increasing control over the forces of nature under the name of progress.”<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, Rousseauism, asserting that man is naturally good and becomes wicked only through flawed institutions, rejected all kinds of “unnatural” control and restriction of the individual. As Babbitt quoted the French critic Gustave Lanson, Romanticism “exasperates and inspires revolt and fires enthusiasms and irritates hatreds; it is the mother of violence, the source of all that is uncompromising.”<sup>8</sup>

The New Cultural Movement, as interpreted by Wu Mi, was nothing more than an encomium of naturalism in a Chinese way. He was well aware of the radical intention of the New Intellectuals to destroy completely the institutions and mind-set of the traditional society in the name of science and democracy. When defending the old system, Wu Mi was careful to distinguish between the “good” elements and the “bad” elements of tradition. To him, old practices like forbidding a widow to remarry were superficial representations of a rich tradition. Such practices, if unreasonable, could always be abolished. However, the concept of chastity constituted a core principle of tradition, one which should be preserved in any circumstances if human beings were not to revert to the state of wild beings.<sup>9</sup>

In Wu Mi’s view, the flaw of the New Cultural Movement was not that the New Intellectuals were eager to promote new thought or Western culture, or that they aimed to demolish certain irratio-

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<sup>7</sup> Irving Babbitt, “What I Believe: Rousseau and Religion,” *Character and Culture: Essays on East and West*, with new introduction by Claes G. Ryn (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 229.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 228-29.

<sup>9</sup> Wu Mi, “On the New Cultural Movement” (Lun Xinwenhua Yundong), CR, No. 4, April 1922, 19.

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*One-sidedness  
opposed.*

nal old practices. Rather, Wu Mi believed that the main defect of the New Cultural Movement lay in the kind of ideology the New Intellectuals were attempting to introduce. In fact, Wu Mi and the CR circle were not against the introduction of Western culture. They were, however, opposed to the New Intellectuals' one-sided promotion of naturalism. Wu Mi insisted that naturalism was just a small segment of the rich Western culture; hence it was wrong for the New Intellectuals to regard it as the sole representative of Western civilization. Even worse, according to Wu Mi, was that the New Cultural Movement's one-sided promotion of naturalism was introducing into China a system of thought that Babbitt and other distinguished scholars had already shown to have been the source of calamities in the West.<sup>10</sup> The New Cultural Movement thus threatened to weaken or destroy a proper view of life among the Chinese.<sup>11</sup>

In Wu Mi's opinion, one important consequence of the importation of naturalism was the spread of the unrestrained admiration of science that was typical of Baconianism. Wu Mi maintained that, no matter how hard one tries to apprehend the meaning of the universe, there will always remain aspects of reality that men and women cannot fully understand. Those things that can be perceived by man are finite in nature while those that cannot be perceived are infinite. Thus there is a need for man to complement empirical rationality with faith and imagination. The love of science should be accompanied by morality and religion. The believer in naturalism, however, ignores or disparages morality and religion while foolishly believing he is addressing the whole of experience. Such a distorted outlook wreaks havoc on morality and religion, both of which are crucial components of a proper view of life.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, through the popularization of Rousseauism, the New Cultural Movement disseminated populism into every aspect of Chinese society. In the literary field, the New Intellectuals crusaded for a vernacular style of writing that would appeal to the taste of the common people. In his famous article *On Literary Revolution* (Wenxue Geming Lun), which exemplified the view of the

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Wu Mi, "My View of Life" (Wo zhi Renshengguan), CR, No. 16, April 1923, 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

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New Intellectuals on literary reform, Chen Duxiu cried, “Down with the ornate, sycophantic literature of the aristocracy; up with the plain, expressive literature of the people!”<sup>13</sup> His proposal soon won the approbation of the general public. By the time the first issue of CR was published, the vernacular had almost attained the status of a “national” language. Still, Wu Mi and the other CR members were unwilling to adopt the vernacular in their writings. Yet it would be misleading to conclude that Wu Mi was against the usage of vernacular. In fact, Wu Mi was well known for his study on *The Dream of the Red Mansion* (Hongloumeng), a seventeenth century novel written in vernacular form. What made Wu Mi uncomfortable with the vernacular literary works of the “new” writers of his day was their marked tendency toward superficiality and crudity. In his opinion, not only did these works disparage the aesthetic nature of literature but their wholesale employment of cliché rendered them blatantly banal.<sup>14</sup> Wu Mi thus emphasized the need for superior talent when the inditing of literary works was the goal.<sup>15</sup>

While Wu Mi obviously opposed the glorification of literary populism by the New Intellectuals, he did not confine his criticism to the cultural realm. He also attacked the political aspect of populism.

Political populism, in its extreme form, holds that political leadership can be displaced by direct voting of the masses. Public policies can be set, not by political leaders, but by numerical majorities that supposedly reflect the “general will.” Wu Mi, with Babbitt, dismissed this notion as a peculiar conceit. He shared Babbitt’s view that “in the long run democracy will be judged, no less than other forms of government, by the quality of its leaders, a quality that will depend in turn on the quality of their vision.”<sup>16</sup> To be spe-

*Democracy to be judged on quality of its leaders.*

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<sup>13</sup> Chen Duxiu, “On Literary Revolution” (Wenxue Geming Lun), *New Youth* (Xin Qingnian), vol.2, no. 6, February 1917. The English translation is obtained from Timothy Wong trans. “On Literary Revolution,” in Kirk A. Denton, ed., *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature 1893-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 141.

<sup>14</sup> Wu Mi, “On the Correct Way of Inditing Literary Work in Today’s World” (Lun Jinri Wenxue Chuangzao zhi Zhengfa), CR, No. 15, March 1923.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1924), 16. Wu Mi’s translation and opinion can be found in his “Babbitt’s on Democracy and Leadership” (Baibide Lun Minzhi yu Lingxiu), CR, No. 32, August 1924, 15.

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cific, where politics is concerned, both Babbitt and Wu Mi placed their hope in the quality of elites rather than of the general public. While Wu Mi's repudiation of the New Cultural Movement thus went beyond plain cultural discussion to encompass politics as well, Wu Mi did not consider his criticism of populism in its cultural and political aspects to be separate endeavors.

We have seen that Wu Mi's criticism of the New Cultural Movement was based on his rejection of the naturalism glorified by that movement. To understand Wu Mi's rejection of naturalism, it is helpful to understand his view of human nature, which in many ways resembles that of Babbitt.

### *Human Nature*

In Babbitt's view, Rousseau's most forceful attack on the Christian tradition was his "sudden vision" on a summer day in 1749 that, in his own words, "man is naturally good and that it is by our institutions alone that men become wicked." For Babbitt,

The consequences that have flowed from this new 'myth' of man's natural goodness have been almost incalculable. Its first effect was to discredit the theological view of human nature, with its insistence that man has fallen, not from Nature as Rousseau asserts, but from God, and that the chief virtue it behooves man to cultivate in this fallen state is humility. According to the Christian, the true opposition between good and evil is in the heart of the individual: the law of the spirit can scarcely prevail, he holds, over the law of members without a greater or lesser degree of succor in the form of divine grace. The new dualism which Rousseau sets up—that between man naturally good and his institutions—has tended not only to substitute sociology for theology, but to discredit the older dualism in any form whatsoever.<sup>17</sup>

According to Babbitt, Rousseau's view of human nature could be classified as monism; with evil rooted solely in institutions, human nature was constituted by goodness alone. Babbitt, on the other hand, adhered to the old tradition of dualism with respect to human nature. This dualism "affirms a struggle between good and evil in the heart of the individual," rather than transferring the struggle to society, in the manner of a Rousseau.<sup>18</sup>

Inspired by Babbitt, Wu Mi also assumed a dualistic standpoint on this subject. He refuted those who regarded human nature as

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<sup>17</sup> Irving Babbitt, "What I Believe," 227-28.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

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solely evil or solely good. The former stance was that set forth by theologians such as Saint Augustine (354-430). It upheld the religious belief that men were reduced to evil as a result of Adam's consumption of the Forbidden Fruit. They were bound to suffer in hell after death unless they received God's grace. However, who would be selected by God to receive His kindness would depend entirely upon God's will. Men were unable to influence the selection, no matter their good deeds. Although Wu Mi thought that the intention of such teaching was benign, he believed it aroused fear within the minds of many. Furthermore, since the selection by God did not rely on the performance of men, the whole assessment was capricious. As a result, men might come to lack a motive to strive for goodness.

But if the attempt of the theologian to nurture the goodness of men through the doctrine of depravity was unfruitful, the view that appraised human nature as absolutely good was, Wu Mi proclaimed, ruinous to morality. The problem lay in the fact that the supporters of this view normally blamed human evil on the external environment. From Wu Mi's point of view, this was totally irresponsible. Men would have every reason not to act according to the standard of morality, since they could shift the responsibility to some point outside themselves. Only a dualistic view of human nature would serve the purpose of encouraging men to use their own free will to choose between good and evil. Only such a view encourages men to bear the full responsibility for their choices.<sup>19</sup>

At first glance Wu Mi's notion of human nature would seem to contradict the Confucian tradition, since, following the teaching of Mencius, *hsing*, or human nature, was accepted as purely good by Confucian scholars, at least the Confucian scholars in the Dao Xue tradition.<sup>20</sup> Wu Mi insisted, however, that his perception of human nature corresponded to the teaching of the ancient sages. He

*Rashness of  
yu restrained  
by Inner  
Check (ke ji).*

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<sup>19</sup> Wu Mi, "My View of Life," 10-12.

<sup>20</sup> Generally speaking, Neo-Confucianism in the Sung-Ming period spoke only of a dualistic *hsing* when referring to the *Ch'i*, or ether or physical aspect of the *hsing*. When referring to the the Nature of Heaven and Earth, or *tian di* aspect of the *hsing*, which only men had the ability to unfold and which therefore was the mark for distinguishing human beings and other species, the Neo-Confucian scholars agreed that it carried the quality of absolute goodness. As for the physical *hsing*, although the Confucian scholars could not deny its existence, they were not willing to recognize it as human nature because it was possessed by both human beings and other species. The first philosopher who made a distinction be-



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avoided the usage of *hsing*, turning to *li*, or reason, and *yu*, or impulses or desire, to demonstrate the idea of dualism. *Li* provided a Will to Refrain or Inner Check (*ke ji*) to limit the rashness of the *yu*. This would prevent a person from acting simply according to his desire. This inner check, however, was not necessarily restrictive. If the desire was reasonable, reason would allow it to act on its own wish. It was only when the desire was immoral that there was a need to refrain under the check of reason. The advantage of this theory over that of monism, as Wu Mi indicated, was its attachment of morality to free will and its emphasis on personal responsibility.<sup>21</sup>

The belief in the need for an Inner Check led Wu Mi to criticize the New Intellectuals' search for absolute rights. In his view, the notion of absolute rights gave unlimited gratification to the desires. Romanticism, popularized by the New Cultural Movement, urged man to act according to his natural emotions and was strongly against any form of restriction or "artificial" rules.<sup>22</sup> Under the influence of Romanticism, the New Intellectuals of China pushed for an unlimited acceptance of individual rights, without any acknowledgment of obligation. Wu Mi warned that the absence of temperance would eventually lead to the loss of loyalty and forbearance. In the end, China would fall apart due to the worsening of economic crises and the collapse of the political framework.<sup>23</sup>

The remedy Wu Mi suggested to counter the injurious effect of immoral desire is to exercise the Inner Check. As an example of a person's failure to exercise it, Wu Mi cited a leader of the workers and common folk who had agitated for universal equality and ignited social and political revolution. According to Wu Mi, the radical deeds of this individual, whom he did not identify by name, were driven unconsciously by his personal hatreds and desire for revenge. Although this radical writer believed that he was striving for the happiness of the public, his life's work actually inflicted great damage on society. If this person instead had exercised the In-

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tween these two forms of *hsing* was Zhang Zai (1020-1077). See e.g. Ch'ang Tsai, *An Annotation of Zhengmeng by Master Zhang* (Zhangzi Zhengming Zhu), annotated by Wang Fuzhi (1619-1692) (Taipei: Shijie Shuju, 1970), Vol 1, 91-92.

<sup>21</sup> Wu Mi, "My View of Life," 12-14.

<sup>22</sup> Wu Mi, trans., "Irving Babbitt's Humanism" (Baibide zhi Renwen Zhuyi), CR, No. 19, July 1923, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Wu Mi, "My View of Life," 18-19.

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ner Check, he would have held back from advocating such extreme and socially destructive measures.<sup>24</sup>

Wu Mi was obviously referring to Marx in the above example. His advocacy of the Inner Check was thus a way to restrain the widespread enthusiasm for Marxism during the New Cultural Movement.<sup>25</sup> Here one can sense the political implications of Wu Mi's view of human nature.

*A reference to Marx.*

### *Cultural or Political?*

Conservatism in modern China is viewed by most scholars as primarily a cultural phenomenon. That is because those conservatives in question did not for the most part discuss the broader social and political implications of their views. Typical of the predominant assessment of the Chinese conservatives is this observation by Benjamin Schwartz:

Another particular aspect of modern Chinese conservatism is that it is largely cultural conservatism and not basically a sociopolitical conservatism committed to the prevailing sociopolitical status quo. . . . Edmund Burke did not approve of everything in the sociopolitical structure and culture of late eighteenth-century England but he did approve of a vast number of things in general and of the political order in particular. His commitment to the whole involved a deep commitment to the myriad parts. In China, however, by the beginning of the twentieth century we find few members of the articulate intelligentsia who are prepared to defend the current sociopolitical order as a whole.<sup>26</sup>

Charlotte Furth, too, sees a disjuncture of politics and culture in the conservative camp. She cites a few cultural conservatives like Zhang Binglin (1868-1936) and Xiong Shili (1885-1968) to demonstrate that all accepted the necessity of political change and therefore felt constrained to consider cultural-moral questions apart from the political process.<sup>27</sup> For Furth this group within the cultural

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* In the article "On the New Cultural Movement," Wu Mi expressed his hostility towards Marxism as he accused the New Intellectuals of introducing Marxism into China. See Wu Mi, "On the New Cultural Movement," 13.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin I. Schwartz, "Notes on Conservatism in General and in China in Particular," 16-17.

<sup>27</sup> Charlotte Furth, "Culture and Politics in Modern Chinese Conservatism," in *The Limits of Change: Essays on Conservative Alternatives in Republican China*, 30.

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elite might be classified as conservative only in the cultural aspect. On social and political issues, they tended to agree with the reformers.

Furth's view is supported by other studies. In his study of Lin Shu (1852-1924), Chow Tse-tsung affirmed that during the May Fourth Movement many conservatives approved of the May Fourth Incident of 1919: a protest against the military government in Peking for losing Qing Dao to the Japanese at the Peace Negotiation in Paris.<sup>28</sup> A key example of such approval was Ma Xulun (1885-1970) of the National Essence school, who even took a direct part in the students' movement.<sup>29</sup> In his study of the National Essence Movement, Laurence A. Schneider suggested that before about 1895 China was a system in which the state, society, and the arts were viewed as inseparable parts of a whole. However, "from the late nineteenth century this integrated system and holistic outlook began to fall apart. One of the earliest symptoms of this disintegration was the 'discovery of culture' by scholars who, in their approach to dealing with China's contemporary crises, saw a special body of native literature and art as a thing-in-itself, independent of and even more fundamental than the political and even social institutions which until then had been intimately associated with it."<sup>30</sup>

Evidence such as the foregoing would seem to justify studying the cultural inclination of early twentieth century Chinese conservatives apart from their political preferences. It is therefore not surprising to find that certain scholars who studied conservatism during the May Fourth era purposely avoided the conflicting views of the New Intellectuals and the conservatives concerning politics and society.<sup>31</sup> An examination of Wu Mi's conservatism seems to indicate, however, that, even if one strictly limits one's attention to those conservatives who were far removed from the political front lines in twentieth century China, one can still detect some intention to counteract certain aspects of the political ideology propagated

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<sup>28</sup> Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*, 119.

<sup>29</sup> See Ma Xulun, *My Life Before Sixties* (Wo zai Liushi Sui Yiqian) (Peking: Sanlian Bookstore, 1983).

<sup>30</sup> Laurence A. Schneider, "National Essence and the New Intelligentsia," in *The Limits of Change: Essays on Conservative Alternatives in Republican China*, 57.

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., Shen Sung-Chiao, *The Critical Review Group: A Conservative Alternative to the New Cultural Movement in the May Fourth Era* (Xueheng Pai yu Wusi Shiqi de Fan Xinwenhua Yundong) (Taipei: National Taiwan University, 1984), 4.

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by the New Cultural Movement. Attributing the political chaos they experienced to the importation by the New Intellectuals of “harmful” ideologies from the West, such conservatives saw a possible antidote for the worsening sociopolitical situation—one based on traditional culture.

If we shift our focus to the New Intellectuals, it is easy to see that their advocacy of Western culture was essentially political in nature. After a series of political reforms that ended in disappointment, the New Intellectuals concluded that the corrupted spirit of the Chinese was at the root of the iniquitous political system and that this spirit was supported by the traditional culture. Lu Xun, in his well-known *Preface to Calls of Arms* (Nahan Zixu), recalled that he had initially wished to pursue medical study in Japan. That wish stemmed in part from his awareness that the Japanese Reformation in great measure owed its rise to the introduction into Japan of Western medical science. But after a shocking experience in which Lu saw a slide show of a Chinese beheaded by the Japanese military, watched by other Chinese who had come to enjoy the spectacle, Lu became convinced that “medical science was not so important after all. The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they might be, could only serve to be made examples of or as witnesses of such futile spectacles; and it was not necessarily deplorable if many of them died of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit; and since at that time I felt that literature was the best means to this end, I decided to promote a literary movement.”<sup>32</sup> Clearly, the spirit of the Chinese was corrupted by the “sick” culture. For that reason Lu Xun attacked the traditional culture in his numerous influential works.

It is important to note that, despite their many differences, the conservatives agreed with the New Intellectuals on the importance of the relationship between culture and politics. The conservatives, too, thought that culture played the crucial role in shaping politics. Believing that the destruction of the traditional culture by the New Intellectuals would make the political situation worse rather than better, the conservatives saw the rejuvenation of the traditional culture as a duty.

Wu Mi wrote little on the 1911 Revolution and the May Fourth

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<sup>32</sup> Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, trans., *Lu Xun: Selected Works* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1980), Vol. 1, 34-35.

*Conservatives, New Intellectuals agreed on importance of culture for politics.*

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Incident.<sup>33</sup> Yet his involvement in the Guo Fang Hui, or National Defense Alliance, formed in Boston by Chinese students to exhibit their antipathy towards the Twenty-one Demands issued by Japan in 1915,<sup>34</sup> suggests that he was in accord with the patriotic spirit of the May Fourth Incident. There also is nothing in his writings to suggest that he preferred monarchy to democracy. For these reasons, we might be apt to classify him as a cultural conservative with “progressive” political views. Nevertheless, his contempt for populism and Marxism in politics was obvious even though he confined most of his writings to the discussion of cultural issues. When presenting his view of life, Wu Mi quoted a famous line from the book of Mencius: “If poor, they attended to their own virtue in solitude; if advanced to dignity, they made the whole kingdom virtuous as well.”<sup>35</sup> He cited the experience of ancient sages like Confucius, Socrates, and Plato, who retreated to private education in times of political turbulence to avoid being killed while upholding righteousness.<sup>36</sup> Here Wu Mi was trying to stress that withdrawal from politics during “bad” times was not, as many believed, a cowardly choice. Instead, it was a good and clever method to allow oneself to scrutinize politics effectively.

Wu Mi tried to follow the example of the ancient sages by writing extensively on cultural topics. And though he may not have been opposed to the 1911 Revolution or the May Fourth Incident, he unreservedly attacked populism and Marxism from a cultural perspective once he came to perceive them as a menace to the already snarled political condition. Hence, it would be inaccurate to

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<sup>33</sup> In his self-edited chronology, Wu Mi had a few words of comment that indicate his approval of the 1911 Revolution and the May Fourth Incident. Although this piece of work is written by Wu Mi himself, it should still be referred to with care because it was either written or modified significantly during the Cultural Revolution; hence the information provided may not truly reflect Wu Mi’s thought. See Wu Mi, *Self-Edited Chronology of Wu Mi 1894-1925* (Wu Mi Zibian Nianpu: Yiba Jiushi zhi Yijiu Erwu Nian), arranged by Wu Xuezhao (Beijing: Sanlian Bookstore, 1993), 105-107, 193-194.

<sup>34</sup> This information was provided by Wu Mi’s daughter Wu Xuezhao, in her *Wu Mi and Chen Yinke* (Wu Mi yu Chen Yinke) (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 1992), 16-18.

<sup>35</sup> Wu Mi, “My View of Life,” 20. English translation for this line is obtained from James Legge, trans., “Mencius,” in *The Four Books* (Taichong: Yishi Publishing, 1971), 453.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-22.

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make a clear distinction between Wu Mi's cultural conservatism and his political inclinations.

The example of Wu Mi calls into question the prevalent view that conservatives in twentieth century China disagreed with the New Intellectuals only on the cultural level and that no serious political controversy separated these two groups of individuals. While this might be true insofar as the 1911 Revolution and the May Fourth Incident are concerned, it definitely does not hold true for more radical movements like communism. When challenged by certain schools of radical thought, particularly Marxism, that called for a thorough structural transformation of politics and society, the cultural conservatives—whether directly involved in political and social reforms like Carsun Chang (1887-1969) and Liang Shu-ming (1893-1988) or active only in scholarship like Wu Mi—all proved to be politically conservative as well.

*Cultural conservatives also were politically conservative.*