

“OUR ATTITUDE TOWARD MODERN WESTERN CIVILIZATION”
By Hu Shi

Introduction

Beginning around 1917, Chinese intellectuals began to engage each other in serious discussion and debate on culture, history, philosophy, and related subjects — all with an eye to the bigger problem of China’s weakness and the possible solutions to that problem. This period of intellectual debate, labeled the May Fourth Movement, lasted to around 1921.

Hu Shi (1891-1962) was one of the leading May Fourth intellectuals. A student of agriculture at Cornell University, and then of philosophy under John Dewey at Columbia University, Hu led the way in the movement to write Chinese in the vernacular, as opposed to the elegant, but (to the average Chinese) incomprehensible classical style. Hu also played a leading role in the cultural debates of the time.

The document below is one of Hu’s contributions to the debate on Western civilization.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

From *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From 1600 Through the Twentieth Century*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Richard Lufrano, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 386-387. © 2000 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

“Our Attitude toward Modern Western Civilization”
By Hu Shi

At present the most unfounded and more harmful distortion is to ridicule Western civilization as materialistic and worship Eastern civilization as spiritual. ... The modern civilization of the West, built on the foundation of the search for human happiness, not only has definitely increased material enjoyment to no small degree, but can also satisfy the spiritual needs of mankind. ... In religion and ethics, it has overthrown the religion of superstitions and established rational belief, has destroyed divine power and established a humanistic religion, has discarded the unknowable Heaven or paradise and directed its efforts to building a paradise among men and Heaven on earth. ...

...

The civilization under which people are restricted and controlled by a material environment from which they cannot escape, and under which they cannot utilize human thought and intellectual power to change environment and improve conditions, is the

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQ) on
“OUR ATTITUDE TOWARD MODERN WESTERN CIVILIZATION,” BY HU SHI**

civilization of a lazy and nonprogressive people. It is a truly materialistic civilization. Such a civilization can only obstruct but cannot satisfy the spiritual demands of mankind.

Questions:

1. How does Hu Shi overturn the usual stereotypes in discussing East and West?
2. If you were a Chinese person arguing against Hu around 1918, what points might you make to refute his characterization of the West?
3. What can you conclude about Hu’s values from these comments?
4. As you read Hu’s comments, what do you think he may possibly believe are among the causes of China’s weakness in the world?

Longer Selection

From *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From 1600 Through the Twentieth Century*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Richard Lufano, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 386-387. © 2000 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

**“Our Attitude toward Modern Western Civilization”
By Hu Shi**

At present the most unfounded and more harmful distortion is to ridicule Western civilization as materialistic and worship Eastern civilization as spiritual. ... The modern civilization of the West, built on the foundation of the search for human happiness, not only has definitely increased material enjoyment to no small degree, but can also satisfy the spiritual needs of mankind. In philosophy it has applied highly refined methods to the search for truth and to investigation into the vast secrets of nature. In religion and ethics, it has overthrown the religion of superstitions and established a rational belief, has destroyed divine power and established a humanistic religion, has discarded the unknowable Heaven or paradise and directed its efforts to building a paradise among men and Heaven on earth. It has cast aside the arbitrarily asserted transcendence of the individual soul, has utilized to the highest degree the power of man’s new imagination and new intellect to promote a new religion and new ethics that are fully socialized, and has endeavored to work for the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people.

The most outstanding characteristic of Eastern civilization is to know contentment, whereas that of Western civilization is not to know contentment.

Contented Easterners are satisfied with their simple life and therefore do not seek to increase their material enjoyment. They are satisfied with ignorance and “not understanding

Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQ) on

“OUR ATTITUDE TOWARD MODERN WESTERN CIVILIZATION,” BY HU SHI

and not knowing”¹ and therefore have devoted no attention to the discovery of truth and the invention of techniques and machinery. They are satisfied with their present lot and environment and therefore do not want to conquer nature but merely [to] be at home with nature and at peace with their lot. They do not want to change systems, but rather to mind their own business. They do not want a revolution, but rather to remain obedient subjects.

The civilization under which people are restricted and controlled by a material environment from which they cannot escape, and under which they cannot utilize human thought and intellectual power to change environment and improve conditions, is the civilization of a lazy and nonprogressive people. It is truly a materialistic civilization. Such civilization can only obstruct but cannot satisfy the spiritual demands of mankind.

¹ *Book of Odes*, Da ya, Wen wang 7.