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Babbitt in China

*Chinese Reactions to Babbitt:  
Admiration, Encumbrance, Vilification*

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Irving Babbitt, the great American humanist, was bound to the modern Chinese culture even though Babbitt himself might not have been aware of it. His erudition and glamour enticed a dozen young Chinese scholars into Harvard University to seek instruction from him. He powerfully influenced those students, who would become major participants in the construction of modern Chinese culture. Among them the most famous are Wu Mi (1894-1978) and his *Xueheng* (*Critical Review*) colleagues, as well as Liang Shiqiu (1902-1987), the best-known humanist intellectual in the 1930s. Writing in classical Chinese, the *Xueheng* Society (or the Critical Review Group), the best-known conservative society in the China of the 1920s, introduced Babbitt into China during the great mass fervor of the New Culture Movement. Their introduction of Babbitt had the effect of associating his humanism with Chinese-style conservatism, which was not entirely helpful at a time when things new were much in fashion. The *Xueheng* writers' use of the highly elaborate classical Chinese style, which by then had been abandoned by most other intellectuals, led to further confusion about Babbitt's real views, limiting the attention that those views might have received. It was Liang Shiqiu who first called attention to the damage to Babbitt's reputation among competing groups of Chinese intellectuals that might be attributed to his being associated with the *Xueheng* group. Yet, whatever mis-

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understanding of Babbitt's insights that may have stemmed from the efforts of the *Xueheng* scholars, Liang himself probably inflicted at least as much damage on Babbitt by using the latter's writings as a weapon against Lu Xun (1881-1936), one of the most well-known and most respected Chinese writers of the twentieth century, in a way that Babbitt himself, who actually agreed with some of what Lu Xun advocated, might have regretted. Babbitt, through no fault of his own, became known as hostile to Lu Xun, which has led to a demonization of Babbitt among many intellectuals in China. Despite these and other misunderstandings concerning Babbitt, his ideas have exerted a major cultural influence in China that persists to this day. Yet the paradox is that, thanks to all the confusion that still surrounds Babbitt's ideas in China, it can truly be said that his humanism has yet to be properly introduced, let alone accurately expounded, in that country.

### *I. Admiration for Babbitt among Chinese Intellectuals*

Babbitt was a magnet to most of the Chinese intellectuals at Harvard University in the 1910s and 1920s; they were attracted by his erudition and personal appeal. Mei Guangdi (1890-1945) was one of the first Chinese to study with Babbitt. Following his graduation from Northwestern University, he continued his studies at Harvard. After reading Babbitt's works, Mei came to think of Babbitt as a modern saint, and this fired his determination to become one of Babbitt's students.<sup>1</sup> He had a more intimate connection with Babbitt than other Chinese students. His academic record, preserved at Harvard University, explicitly states that he was under the supervision of Babbitt while he was studying at Harvard's graduate school.<sup>2</sup> In 1924 when Mei returned to Harvard to teach Chinese Language, he had frequent contact with Babbitt. Perhaps as a result of this association, Babbitt discussed in his works Taoist theory about humanity, justice, propriety, wisdom and faith, and the notion of "non-action (Wu-Wei)" as well as the impact of Taoism on modern Chinese culture.<sup>3</sup> Another student who had a

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<sup>1</sup> Hou Jian, "The Origins of Liang Shiqiu's Humanism: Irving Babbitt," *Ode to Autumn* (a book dedicated to Liang), ed. Yu Guangzhong (Jiuge Publishing House, 1998), 71.

<sup>2</sup> Card No. Library Bruear G86817, Mei Kuangti's folder, in Pusey Library of Harvard University.

<sup>3</sup> Irving Babbitt, *On Being Creative and Other Essays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1932), 255.

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*Interest in Wu Mi has given rise to much published misinformation.*

close relationship with Babbitt was Wu Mi, the founder and key figure of the Xueheng Society. Babbitt's signature as Wu's supervisor can still be found on Wu's study plan at Harvard.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1990s, there occurred a major revival of scholarly interest in Chen Yinke (1890-1969), a renowned historian and a close friend of Wu, which led to an accompanying revival of interest in the latter writer, whose work had been long-neglected in mainland China. Unfortunately, some accounts of Wu's life contain much false information and many distortions. Instead of ascertaining facts, some scholars have resorted to conjecture. An example concerns when and how Wu got to Harvard. Wu's entering that institution is often attributed to two factors: Mei's invitation and Wu's admiration for Babbitt.<sup>5</sup> Yao Wenqing, Wu's self-styled bosom friend, gives such a description in *Anecdotes of Wu Mi*: "Wu attended the University of Virginia when he arrived in America. Later, at Mei's suggestion, he turned to Harvard for further studies with Babbitt as his professor."<sup>6</sup> Yet closer examination reveals that such statements are not true. *Wu Mi's Self-Compiled Annals* has a clear and detailed description of his meeting with Mei. It was only after Wu arrived at Harvard that he, through the introduction of his Qinghua College classmate Shi Jiyuan, became acquainted with Mei. "If I had not come to Harvard to study, I would not have had the chance to meet Mei Guangdi in America."<sup>7</sup> From this it is plain that the often-repeated story that Wu went to Harvard at the urging of Mei was pure speculation. All too often such gossip has been spread through what are supposed to be scholarly works.

Babbitt's acceptance of Wu as a student may well have been due to Mei's recommendation. Wu's September 9, 1918, diary entry reads in part: "The university authorities have arranged for Prof. Babbitt to be my adviser—following my request."<sup>8</sup> Irving Babbitt was Wu's one and only adviser. One researcher recently

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<sup>4</sup> Plan of Study, Wu Mi's folder, in Pusey Library of Harvard University.

<sup>5</sup> "Wu Mi's Viewpoint on Chinese Traditional Culture," *Interpreting Wu Mi*, ed. Li Ji-kai (China Social Sciences Literature Publishing House, 2001), 152.

<sup>6</sup> Huang Shitan, ed. *Memories about Mr Wu Mi* (Shanxi People's Publishing House, 1990), 37.

<sup>7</sup> *Wu Mi's Self-Compiled Annals* (Life, Reading, Knowledge Publishing House, 1998), 176-77.

<sup>8</sup> *The Diary of Wu Mi* (Life, Reading, Knowledge Publishing House, 1998), vol. 2, 14.

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claimed: "At Harvard, Wu Mi had two advisers—Irving Babbitt, a famous professor of French literature, and Paul Elmer More, a famous literary critic."<sup>9</sup> This is simply mistaken. It is true that Paul Elmer More was Babbitt's academic partner and close friend, and that Wu greatly revered More, as is indicated in Wu's diary entry of July 24, 1919: "Since I came to this university this summer, I have been reading *Shelburne Essays* by Paul E. More, apart from my courses. There are nine volumes altogether, and I have just finished them today. I have benefited a lot from his teachings."<sup>10</sup> This joint admiration of Babbitt and More explains why Wu often mentioned the two together in his later works. For example, a line in one of Wu's poems declares, "I've benefited from the teachings of Babbitt and More,"<sup>11</sup> and a verse says, "I learned about Humanism from Babbitt and More when I was young." From these words taken alone, a reader might well draw the conclusion that Wu had two advisers at Harvard, but in fact More was only his intellectual-spiritual inspirer, not an adviser in the formal sense. In his early years Paul Elmer More worked as a teaching assistant at Harvard, teaching Sanskrit, but he left Harvard to work for a magazine in New York. He was never a professor at Harvard and could not have been one of Wu's two advisers. Wu's diary is quite clear: "He [More] is my adviser's close friend, and the two are the greatest scholars in America today."<sup>12</sup> Crossing the Pacific to ascertain More's curriculum vitae is too much to ask, but the author of a book on Wu should take the trouble of consulting Wu's diary.

During that period there were also other Chinese scholars who went to Harvard who may have been attracted to Babbitt. One of them is Tang Yongtong, a very famous scholar in modern China. Yue Daiyun, a leading Chinese scholar in comparative literature, surmises: "Tang Yongtong, who had studied philosophy at Hamlin University, transferred to Harvard to work on Buddhism, Sanskrit and Balinese. Obviously Tang was attracted to Babbitt, because Babbitt focused much of his attention on the study of Buddhism

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<sup>9</sup> Li Ji-kai et al., ed., *Interpreting Wu Mi* (China Social Scientific Literature Publishing House, 2001), 245.

<sup>10</sup> *The Diary of Wu Mi*, vol. 2, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Wu Mi, *Wu Mi's Poems and Poetic Criticism* (Shanxi People's Publishing House, 1992), 250.

<sup>12</sup> *The Diary of Wu Mi*, vol. 2, 38.

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while being also proficient in Sanskrit and Balinese. . . .”<sup>13</sup> Yue does not give any direct evidence here that Babbitt’s knowledge of Asian languages and religions was crucial to Tang’s decision to go to Harvard, but as his daughter-in-law as well as a serious and trustworthy scholar in her own right, her remarks should be reliable. If her surmise is credible, it may apply also to Chen Yinque. He entered Harvard in 1919 to “study Sanskrit and Balinese under the guidance of Lanman . . . .”<sup>14</sup> Charles Rockwell Lanman (1850–1941) was a famous expert in Sanskrit. It is possible that Babbitt was another attraction at Harvard to Chen Yinque.

*Babbitt’s  
reputation  
drew  
numerous  
Chinese  
scholars to  
Harvard.*

Thanks to the influence, direct or indirect, of such precursors as Mei and Wu, a growing number of Chinese scholars subsequently became familiar with Babbitt and chose for that reason to study at Harvard. Zhang Xinhai as well as Lou Guanglai, who later became a senior government official and a renowned scholar, went to Harvard on Wu’s recommendation. In his September 18, 1919, diary entry, Wu writes: “Since the first two months this spring (lunar calendar), these two [Zhang and Lou] wrote me several letters asking about literature and I gave them much information. They expressed great admiration after they had read books by my adviser Babbitt, and then they decided to transfer to Harvard.”<sup>15</sup> By contrast, it was only through the indirect influence of Mei, Wu, and their group that another Chinese scholar, Liang Shiqiu, first became acquainted with Babbitt and his humanism. More specifically, it was through the journal *Xueheng*, created and run by Wu and Mei, that Liang learned of Babbitt and his writings. As a youth who “was swept off his feet by so-called ‘Tides of New Thinking,’” Liang vigorously disagreed with Babbitt at that time. He chose Harvard on account of Babbitt, but his original purpose was not to study under him but to “challenge” him.<sup>16</sup> Yet so tremendous was the impact of Babbitt’s ideas and so powerful his spiritual charm that a young and vigorous challenger soon turned into a disciple whose admiration was limitless.

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<sup>13</sup> Yue Daiyun, “The Chinese Conservatism in World Cultural Dialogue,” *Interpreting Wu Mi*, 10.

<sup>14</sup> Liu Yihuan, *Chen Yinque: A Master of Traditional Chinese Learning* (Chongqing Publishing House, 1996), 98.

<sup>15</sup> *The Diary of Wu Mi*, vol. 2, 73.

<sup>16</sup> Liang Shiqiu, “On Irving Babbitt and His Thought,” *Irving Babbitt as a Master*, ed. Liang Shiqiu et al. (Julang Publishing House, 1977), 2.

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## II. Coloration and Encumbrance

Lin Yutang (1895-1976) was another modern Chinese writer who received instruction from Babbitt at Harvard. Although in the end he would “refuse to accept the parlance of Professor Irving Babbitt,” and would even defend Spingarn, Babbitt’s rival,<sup>17</sup> Lin nevertheless wrote that, “when at Harvard, I was studying at the Comparative Literature Research Institute. My professors then were Bliss Perry . . . [and] Irving Babbitt . . .” Lin stated further that, “[u]nder the guidance of Bliss Perry, Irving Babbitt . . . and the other renowned professors, I have acquired genuine learning.” Undoubtedly, Irving Babbitt was the main focus of attention of the youthful Chinese scholars who were studying at Harvard during that period. As a central figure at Harvard, Babbitt was at the core of their Harvard Complex. It may seem an exaggeration to claim, as has one contemporary Chinese scholar, that, “[a]s far as Americans are concerned, it is Irving Babbitt who has exerted the greatest influence on Chinese literature.”<sup>18</sup> Yet Lin, who had studied under Babbitt and later freed himself from his influence, frankly admitted, “The influence that Irving Babbitt exerts on modern Chinese literary criticism has been profound and swift.”<sup>19</sup> The comment is pertinent and accurate. Thanks to the energetic advocacy of Mei, Hu Xiansu (1894-1968), the latecomer Liang, and most especially Wu, the theory of Irving Babbitt became one of the key sources of modern Chinese literary criticism. Through the influence of his Chinese admirers, Babbitt involuntarily and probably unknowingly became deeply ensnared in the vortex of modern Chinese literary controversies. His influence is of such significance that it cannot be neglected in the history of modern Chinese culture.

How was Babbitt and, for that matter, Harvard pictured in China during Babbitt’s lifetime and in the decades to come? They were viewed among those prejudiced against him as gloomy and old-fashioned and as resisting, through sheer procrastinative obstinacy, the brilliance and vigor of the age. Leafing through *New Youth*, the journal that started the New Culture Movement, and the articles by Hu Shi (1891-1962), the leader of the movement and China’s ambassador to America during the Second World

*Babbitt's thought a key source of modern Chinese literary criticism.*

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<sup>17</sup> *Autobiography of Lin Yutang* (Jiangsu Literature and Art Publishing House, 1995), 29, 80-81.

<sup>18</sup> Hou Jian, “The Origins of Liang Shiqiu’s Humanism: Irving Babbitt,” 74.

<sup>19</sup> *Autobiography of Lin Yutang*, 80.

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*Babbitt and Chinese disciples were viewed as swimming against overwhelming cultural tide.*

War, one can see a sharp contrast. Hu, Lu Xun, and their comrades represented the rising and the bright aspect of the age, while Mei, Wu and other Babbitt students as well as Babbitt himself—and even Harvard—represented the gloomy and declining aspect of the age. The contrast was all the more striking, coming at a time when the New Culture Movement was seen as dispelling the darkness of the old culture and ushering in a new epoch of luminosity. Leafing through *Xueheng*, the antithesis of *New Youth*, one also senses that at a time when the New Culture was marching in all its glory towards cultural modernization, *Xueheng*, conjoined in Chinese minds with Babbitt and Harvard, could only seem to embody gloom and outdatedness. This was nowhere more true than in the instance of Liang Shiqiu. In the 1930s, when proletarian literature was raging with full power in China, he stood out alone as a Don Quixote to claim that literature has never belonged to the majority and that universal humanity is the core of literature. In doing so, he singled out Irving Babbitt—his “western Buddha”—as his inspiration. It was inevitable that Liang, who was swimming counter to the overwhelming cultural tides of the time, would be no more fortunate than his predecessors Mei and Wu. Harvard University, though a first-class progressive institution of higher education, was perceived as gray and backward-looking. Irving Babbitt, an academic giant who advocated tolerance and understanding, was seen by left-leaning intellectuals through the lens provided by his conservative Chinese disciples as a cunning and adamant old conservative.

As mentioned before, the introduction of Babbitt and his ideas into Chinese literary circles was credited to the *Xueheng* Society. It is paradoxical, in light of subsequent events, that it is Liang who argued that Babbitt’s views were distorted by Wu and other members of the *Xueheng* group. Liang, who had gained a general knowledge of Babbitt by reading the writings of the *Xueheng* circle during his university days, argued that Babbitt’s “theory did seem to go against the tide of the age in that it decried current deleterious phenomena, but its essence lay not at all in obstinacy or pedantry. It is regrettable that his ideas were encumbered by the classical Chinese language used to introduce his thought by the intellectuals of *Xueheng*, resulting in the failure of its due influence. This is unfortunate.”<sup>20</sup> So was in fact the case.

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<sup>20</sup> Liang Shiqiu, “On Irving Babbitt and His Thought,” 2.

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The journal *Xueheng*, which was begun in early 1922, was edited by Mei Guangdi, Wu Mi, and Hu Xiansu, with Wu Mi serving as the backbone throughout its existence. The main purpose of the journal was to “spread the quintessence of native Chinese culture [and] absorb new knowledge,” thus achieving a balance between Western culture and Chinese classical culture. It emphasized in particular the need to “express Western ideas using Chinese characters.”<sup>21</sup> Here, “Chinese characters” refers to Chinese classical language, as opposed to the vernacular language promoted by Hu Shi and other modernists. Hence, opposing the new culture and the new literature was a key feature of the journal. From its first to its last issue more than ten years later, *Xueheng* attacked the new culture and the new literature. The first issue included an article “On Architects of the New Culture” by Mei Guangdi, and the last contained an article “On the Literary Revolution and the Literary Dictatorship” by Yi Jun. In effect, *Xueheng* made itself the literary headquarters of modern Chinese conservatism. Once the flag was fluttering, old-type scholars of all ages and from all fields of study—scholarly adherents of the former dynasty as well as retired or deposed officials—came together around *Xueheng*. Even pedants who were used to writing old-style poetry found room for their abilities. Among those who often had poems or articles published in *Xueheng* were Huang Zunxian, Qiu Fengjia, Wu Mei, Kuang Zhouyi, Chen Baochen, and Chen Sanli. More than ten had been among the successful candidates in the highest imperial examinations of the Qing Emperor Guangxu period alone, including Yang Zengluo, Tan Shoukun, Zeng Guangjun, Zhou Zumou, Yao Hua, Shen Zengzhi, Chen Fuchen, Wang Shitong, and Chen Zengshou. Along with these older writers and scholars, *Xueheng* numbered among its contributors younger scholars who had returned to China after studying abroad. Keen on the traditional “Chinese characters,” they used classical Chinese to introduce foreign thought and translate foreign works. Wu, for example, translated foreign novels in Zhanghui style (a traditional Chinese novel with each chapter headed by a couplet giving the gist of its content). He translated Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* and turned the beginning into “a prologue” which was entitled “Headmistress Sending Words to a

*Adherence to classical Chinese literary style hindered Xueheng’s acceptance.*

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<sup>21</sup> “The Orientation of *Xueheng*,” *Xueheng*, No. 3.



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Student's Parents to Curry Favor, A Student Throwing a Dictionary Away to Give Vent to Her Fury." He also translated Thackeray's *The Newcomes* in the Zhanghui style, heading the first chapter with "Fables Satirizing the Society, Heroic Man Rebuking Adultery" and the second chapter with "Falling in Love and Dreaming a Good Dream, Sin Ends Down and Out," thus completely following the old style.<sup>22</sup> The artificiality of their attempt at the impossible, namely, to express the new and foreign in classical Chinese, forcing things new into the old framework, was too conspicuous and jarring to the eye to be ignored and produced such jokes as "Pia of Uto."<sup>23</sup> The editors and contributors of *Xueheng* deliberately took a stand opposite to that of the mainstream Chinese intellectuals of the time. They seemed to embody datedness, staleness, and gloominess as apperceived by Liang.

What disturbed Liang is that this "special flavor" affected negatively the image of Babbitt in China as well as that of Harvard. Wu and the others declared proudly that they had graduated from Harvard and that Babbitt had been their adviser, proclaiming this relationship at every opportunity. In addition to a portrait of Babbitt, they published in inserts to *Xueheng* a picture of Sever Hall, the building in which Babbitt taught his classes. Since the journal normally published only the portraits of writers and thinkers, this was an obvious example of the editors' penchant for drawing attention to the close relationship between themselves and Harvard.<sup>24</sup> The portraits chosen for inclusion also reflected Babbitt's preferences. The portraits of Confucius, Socrates, Sakyamuni, and Jesus were printed in a striking manner; Voltaire's portrait appeared on several occasions, while Rousseau's portrait was published in *Xueheng* only once together with a Chinese version of Sainte Beuve's "On Rousseau's *Confession*," which accorded with Babbitt's well-known critical stance toward Rousseau. The editor's note attached to the translation echoed Babbitt in condemning Rousseau for being responsible for "the evils of society,"

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<sup>22</sup> See in *Xueheng*, No. 55, No. 1, and No. 2 respectively.

<sup>23</sup> Lu Xun, "Criticism of the Xueheng Society," *The Complete Works of Lu Xun*, vol. 1 (People's Literature Publishing House, 1996), 378. Lu Xun satirizes Xiao Chunjin, a Xueheng Society scholar, by imitating his awkward and archaic way of writing, which forcibly cut a noun into two parts, e.g., "Pia of Uto" for "Utopia."

<sup>24</sup> Hou Jian, "The Origins of Liang Shiqiu's Humanism: Irving Babbitt," 70.

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adding that the blame for “the social disorder today goes partly to Rousseau” and that Rousseau “was the virus of civilization.”<sup>25</sup>

Wu Mi and his colleagues spared no efforts to introduce Babbitt in *Xueheng*. They published many essays on him. A small sampling of these writings includes “Babbitt’s View on Humanistic Education in the West and the East,” “Contemporary Western Humanism,” “Babbitt’s Humanism” (a translation from a French paper, “L’Humanisme Positiviste d’Irving Babbitt,” by Louis J.-A. Mercier, in *la Revue Hebdomadaire*, Vol. 30, No. 29, 1921), “Babbitt’s Ideas on Democracy and Leadership” (“the Introduction” to Babbitt’s *Democracy and Leadership*, translated by Wu Mi), “Irving Babbitt’s ‘What is Humanism?’” (from Babbitt’s *Literature and the American College*, translated by Xu Zhene), “Babbitt’s View of European and Asian Cultures” (“Chapter V, Europe and Asia” of Babbitt’s *Democracy and Leadership*, translated by Wu Mi), “Babbitt on the Cycle of Modern Poetry” (from a paper by Babbitt reviewing G. R. Elliott’s “The Cycle of Modern Poetry”), “Babbitt on Benda and French Ideas.” They also translated and introduced Babbitt’s two philosophical companions—More and Stuart P. Sherman. Besides in such translations, the *Xueheng* authors frequently quoted Babbitt in their own writings. This close association between Babbitt and *Xueheng* contributed to an impression that the American thinker was more rigidly conservative than he actually was.

Babbitt’s humanism is similar to the European humanism prevalent in and after the Renaissance; both emphasize the integrity of humanity, the need for balance of development, normalcy of life, and the importance of ethics.<sup>26</sup> But Babbitt was more open-minded and systematic, and put more emphasis on self-cultivation and self-control. According to Babbitt, human life can be divided into three categories: naturalistic, human, and religious. Naturalistic life is inescapable, but should not be allowed to divorce itself from man’s higher potential. The specifically human level of life is what we should aspire to at any moment. Religious life is in a sense the noblest goal, but humanism seeks a less elevated life that is indispensable to civilization. According to Bab-

*Babbitt emphasized self-cultivation and self-control.*

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<sup>25</sup> *Xueheng*, No. 18.

<sup>26</sup> Liang Shiqiu, “Irving Babbitt and His Humanism,” *Modern*, vol. 5, no. 6.

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*Moral and cultural conservatism blended into the order of freedom.*

bitt, people are in urgent need of inner control and adjustment,<sup>27</sup> but the aim is not identical to what was preached by Confucius, that is, pursuing ethical codes—denying oneself and observing propriety. It is to acquire freedom of will in the highest sense. Some scholars claim that freedom of will is one of the basic propositions of Babbitt's philosophy. Babbitt tended to quote Dr. Johnson's words: "All theory is against the freedom of the will, all experience for it."<sup>28</sup> Babbitt can be said to have blended a moral and cultural conservatism into the order of freedom.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, although he believed in Aristotle's theory of mimesis, and admired and embraced ancient wisdom, he protested against mere imitation and rigid adherence to traditional models. In his *On Being Creative*, he advocated mimesis as joined to creativity, which is a development of Aristotle's principle of imitating what should be rather than what is.<sup>30</sup>

*Babbitt ahead of his time.*

From the above, we can see that the essence of Babbitt's humanism is not the imitation and restoration of the ancients, but advocacy of freedom of will and creative mimesis in the highest sense of those terms. As Liang had pointed out, its essence lay not at all in obstinacy and pedantry, though it did go against the tide of the age as it decried many deleterious developments. Indeed, some American scholars asserted that his humanism had a tinge of modernism and even regarded it as one form of modern philosophy.<sup>31</sup> There is a great deal of similarity between Babbitt and Matthew Arnold. They were misunderstood by their contemporaries not because they were insufficiently modern, but because they outpaced their own time in modernity.<sup>32</sup>

The conservatism of Babbitt's humanism lies in the fact that he deemed traditions and historical memories as stabilizing elements of society and politics, standing against the Utopias of the radi-

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<sup>27</sup> Liang Shiqiu, "On Irving Babbitt and His Thought," 5.

<sup>28</sup> Frederick Manchester and Odell Shepard, eds., *Irving Babbitt: Man and Teacher* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), 77.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Wightman and James T. Kloppenberg, *A Companion to American Thought*, (Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1995), 53.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen C. Brennan and Stephen R. Yarbrough, *Irving Babbitt* (Twayne Publishers, 1987), 90; 95.

<sup>31</sup> Dom Oliver Grosselin, *The Intuitive Voluntarism of Irving Babbitt* (Latrobe, PA: St. Vincent Archabbey, 1951), 117.

<sup>32</sup> George A. Panichas, *The Critical Legacy of Irving Babbitt* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1999), 27.

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cal.<sup>33</sup> Still, he did not aim at the revival of outdated schemes. Babbitt's humanism was rich in both a modern and an historical sense. As conveyed to Chinese readers by *Xueheng*, some of the more modern aspects of Babbitt's thought were lost, and this was disheartening to Liang, who noted:

*Babbitt's humanism rich in both a modern and historical sense.*

When *Xueheng* was started, I was still a university student, one who was swept up in the wave of so-called modern thought. At that time I had a negative reaction after reading *Xueheng*, in which the classical Chinese characters scrawled all over the paper kept people from further probing into its content. In this way, Babbitt and his thought were cold-shouldered in China.<sup>34</sup>

At the very time that *Xueheng* began publishing, vernacular Chinese achieved a decisive victory over classical Chinese. Even Qinghua College students like Liang Shiqiu who were versed in classics, to say nothing of literary youth and common readers, would react against *Xueheng*. They would keep their distance. Even if Babbitt's humanism were lauded as gospel, readers' interest would not be aroused if the message were presented in an outmoded form. Viewed from this perspective, *Xueheng's* decision to buck the trend in favor of the vernacular proved to be a strategic mistake.

Liang pointed out, loudly and with some justification, that the association of Babbitt with the *Xueheng* group and its pronounced formal conservatism had discouraged many Chinese intellectuals from giving the American thinker's ideas a fair hearing. He helped to overcome this impediment to widespread interest in Babbitt by arranging the publication of *Babbitt and Humanism* with the New Crescent Bookstore. Liang also drew broad attention to Babbitt by using the latter's ideas as a theoretical weapon in his own intellectual battle with the era's pro-proletarian writers, led most notably by Lu Xun. Due in significant part to these efforts of Liang, Babbitt's Humanism became one of the best-known ways of viewing human life and culture in the China of his day.

### *III. Liang Shiqiu and the Demonization of Babbitt in China*

Liang's efforts marked the end of the relative obscurity of Babbitt's ideas in China among intellectuals of modernist leanings. But Liang's use of Babbitt's ideas and reputation in his widely fol-

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<sup>33</sup> Wightman and Kloppenberg, *A Companion to American Thought*, 53.

<sup>34</sup> Liang Shiqiu, "On Irving Babbitt and His Thought," 2.

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lowed tit-for-tat struggle with Lu Xun, who became one of the most popular Chinese writers of the century, brought for Babbitt something worse than obscurity—namely, widespread demonization. *Xueheng's* use of classical Chinese in elucidating Babbitt had impeded the spread of his ideas, and it had also protected Babbitt from criticism. It would surely have been better to be critically and even coldly discussed than to be subjected to undeserved ignominy. By drawing Babbitt into his own quarrels Liang, who had been quick to blame the *Xueheng* conservatives, inflicted on Babbitt's reputation in China a damage that would prove substantial and enduring.

*Lu Xun, an immensely popular leftist writer, demonized Babbitt though unfamiliar with his thought.*

There is no doubt that it is Lu Xun and not the *Xueheng* scholars who contributed most to the demonization of Babbitt in China. As a central figure in the midstream of the leftist writers, Lu Xun waged protracted war against Liang, who was the foremost critic to belong to the New Moon (or New Crescent) Society. The latter, with Hu Shi as its spiritual leader, was the most influential liberal society in China during the late 1930s. The eye-catching debate between Liang and Lu, which lasted almost a decade, was partly rational and fruitful. For example, the debate on human nature and on the class character of literature raised legitimate theoretical questions. But much of what became an intellectual slugfest was irrational and emotional, the evaluation of Babbitt being a prominent case in point. Thus, although Lu Xun criticized Babbitt with biting sarcasm, he was seldom concerned with the latter's actual ideas. In his famous essay "Rousseau and Taste," Lu Xun admitted that he had not read Babbitt in the original and knew of Babbitt only from scanning Japanese material. He criticized Babbitt only as a means of undermining the reputation of Liang and others, who, he complained, "chewed over Babbitt somewhere in Shanghai" for the purpose of manifesting their special taste. It was Lu Xun's intention to ruin any preference for their "taste." He had the audacity of giving snorts of contempt for Babbitt without reading his works, and even went to the extreme of classifying Babbitt as a member of the New Moon Society:

My translations do not intend to comfort the reader. On the contrary, they usually induce discomfort, even feelings of oppression, aversion and detestation. Those who can offer comfort are the New Crescent people's works and translations—Xu Zhimo's poems, Shen Congwen's and Ling Shuhua's short stories, Chen

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Xiying's essays, Liang Shiqiu's criticisms, Pan Guangdan's eugenics, and also Babbitt's Humanism.<sup>35</sup>

This was not a reasonable way of debating, but Liang could be equally unreasonable. He complained, legitimately enough, that, "Those people like Lu Xun had never read Babbitt," but, allowing his emotions to get the better of him, Liang added that "Lu Xun could never understand Babbitt."<sup>36</sup>

Since the statements concerning Babbitt were largely unreasonable on both sides, it is necessary to clear up what the debate over Babbitt was really about. The source of the controversy was, quite simply, Lu Xun's animosity toward those who had introduced Babbitt's ideas in China—first the *Xueheng* group in the early and mid-1920s and then Liang with his enthusiastic advocacy of Babbitt's ideas in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In particular, Lu believed that Babbitt's supporters, along with the Chinese disciples of other Western thinkers, were more interested in promoting their own opinions and reputations than the ideas of those whose theories they ostensibly championed. Lu complained, for example, that the ideas of Western thinkers such as Babbitt and John Dewey were being filtered through the interpretations of their Chinese advocates and possibly distorted rather than being allowed to stand for themselves in accurate Chinese translation. Lu complained, for example, that, in literary circles, "We knew little [about leading thinkers in the world] and we have equally little material to widen our horizon. Liang Shiqiu has the theory of Babbitt, Xu Zhimo of Tagore and Hu Shi of Dewey."<sup>37</sup> Professor Dewey had his experimentalism and Professor Babbitt had his humanism, and from them "they imported scraps and fragments and by so doing they turned out to be earth-shaking Chi-

*Lu's hostility to Babbitt motivated by animosity toward Chinese disciples.*

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<sup>35</sup> Lu Xun, "'Rigid Translation' and 'Class Quality of Literature,'" *The Complete Works of Lu Xun*, vol. 4 (People's Literature Publishing House, 1996), 197-98. With the exception of Babbitt, all of those mentioned were members of the New Crescent Society, which was led by Hu Shi, Xu Zhimo, and Liang Shiqiu, among others. Xu, at that time China's most famous poet, died in an airplane crash in 1931. Shen Congwen was a famous novelist, as was Ling Shuhua, a very beautiful woman and the wife of Chen Xiying. Chen, mentioned later, was a professor who opposed Lu Xun for several years. Pan Guangdan was a scholar.

<sup>36</sup> Liang Shiqiu, "On Irving Babbitt and His Thought," 4.

<sup>37</sup> Lu Xun, "A General View of the Present New Literature," *The Complete Works of Lu Xun*, vol. 4, 134.

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nese scholars.”<sup>38</sup> Eager to learn about Western theorists through their own works, Lu criticized “the Chinese Franz, Chinese Babbitt, Chinese Gilbert and Chinese Gorky and the like” because their Chinese proponents were eager to blow their own horn and neglected the translation of the original.<sup>39</sup> These “foreign devils” thus became, in a roundabout way, the targets of Lu Xun’s pungent satire. Babbitt became one of the most prominent because Lu Xun identified his antagonist Liang as “a disciple of Babbitt.”<sup>40</sup>

Thus, once again Babbitt’s ideas failed to get a fair hearing in China—this time because of Liang’s use of Babbitt. Lu’s complaint about the lack of translations of Western writers could not be fairly directed against Babbitt’s *Xueheng* disciples. As noted above, they tirelessly translated Babbitt’s works into Chinese, albeit in the traditional style.

As it happens, Lu Xun was not a born opponent of Babbitt and would, in all probability, have been not unsympathetic to him, had he been more familiar with Babbitt’s real beliefs. Babbitt argued against modern scientism and pragmatism, which coincided to a large extent with Lu Xun’s own view of “spurning the material and developing the spiritual.” Babbitt believed that “humanists both in the East and in the West would be minority groups but should stick to their principles and oppose the viewpoints of the majority, which are labeled democratic but are in fact mediocre.”<sup>41</sup> Lu Xun proposed in *On Cultural Bias* the idea of “supporting the individual and ostracizing the mob,” censuring the suppression of the elite by the majority. Lu Xun sounded like an oriental humanist himself. Lu Xun mournfully compared the decline of Chinese culture to the change from warm spring to withering autumn, which comes close to Babbitt’s paying homage to the exemplars of ancient times and his devaluing of the modern ideologies originating with Rousseau. Babbitt admired people who behave like

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<sup>38</sup> Lu Xun, “See If We could Degrade Ourselves,” *The Complete Works of Lu Xun*, vol. 4 (People’s Literature Publishing House, 1996), 547

<sup>39</sup> Lu Xun, “Read Some Books,” *The Complete Works of Lu Xun*, vol. 5, 470.

<sup>40</sup> Lu Xun, “The Conditions of the Literary Circle in Dark China,” *The Complete Works of Lu Xun*, vol. 4, 285.

<sup>41</sup> “Humanities Education in China and the West,” a speech by Irving Babbitt in Sept. 1921, trans by Hou Jian, Liang Shiqiu et al., *Irving Babbitt as a Master*, 15.

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“men of honor,” in Confucius’ phrase, or who conduct themselves with civility. Lu Xun had similar ideas; he looked forward to the emergence of “men of nobility and reason.” The similarities with Babbitt are more noticeable in Lu Xun’s earlier than in his later writings, but Lu Xun never disavowed his earlier ideas in favor of Marxist ideology in the abrupt manner of some Chinese intellectuals during the mid-1920s. Among the latter were Guo Moruo (1892-1978), Chinese poet and revolutionary, who heavily emphasized expression of the individual self in his early poems but turned to expressing collectivist, proletarian feelings in the mid-1920s, and Tian Han (1898-1968), Chinese dramatist, who published a book announcing his “self-negation” in 1930 and wrote only leftist ideological works thereafter. Lu Xun never made such an ideological about-face, but he remained throughout his life open to new ideas, including those imported from other countries, according to their intrinsic merits. For that reason, considering the above-mentioned similarities between his own ideas and Babbitt’s, it is possible to conclude that Lu would have been friendly rather than hostile to Babbitt had it not been for the intellectual brouhaha that developed between himself and Liang. In a word, Babbitt became an unwitting scapegoat.

Of course, Liang’s being an opponent of Lu Xun was not a crime. Nevertheless, the enmity that Liang aroused in Lu subjected Babbitt to many more pointless attacks and ironies, none of which he deserved or expected, than to serious comments and critical analyses. But since a Chinese saying has it that “being a teacher for one day means becoming a lifelong father,” it may have been inevitable that Babbitt, the professor, would have to bear the burden of some of the wrongs committed by his students.

However, a question arises: How close was the relationship between Liang and Babbitt? The data accessible to us relating to Liang’s stay at Harvard show that he did attend Babbitt’s courses, read his books, and have personal contact with him, but no evidence suggests that there existed between them any relationship of a personal nature beyond that between a foreign student and his professor. All that Liang could remember regarding a face-to-face meeting was how Babbitt gave instructions on and a positive evaluation of his English assignment “Wilde and his Aestheticism,” which indicates that Liang the student and Babbitt the professor were not very close. In fact, Liang may have been “stroking



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the tiger's whiskers," as a Chinese proverb goes, by submitting such a report to Babbitt, for Liang knew well that Babbitt abhorred the romanticism of a writer like Wilde. Upon receiving the paper, as Liang later recollected, Babbitt "showed complete surprise at the first sight of the title, as if I were coming to 'stroke the tiger's whiskers' on purpose."<sup>42</sup> Then Babbitt exhorted him to "have infinite caution" in dealing with such a topic.<sup>43</sup> Babbitt's reaction does not indicate that he had any kind of special relationship to this obstinate Chinese student. His admonition was merely an elder's advice to a young man.

*Personal  
relationship  
between  
Babbitt and  
Liang not  
close.*

That the relationship between Babbitt and Liang had not been nearly so intimate as Liang tried to suggest to his Chinese readers is indicated by completely inaccurate statements that Liang wrote concerning Babbitt's parents. As ostensible reasons for Babbitt's strong interest and knowledge of China Liang gave the following: "Babbitt's mother was born in Ningbo, China."<sup>44</sup> On another occasion, he added, "Babbitt's father was born and grew up in Ningbo."<sup>45</sup> Though his versions differed, his intention to show intimacy with Babbitt was the same. In fact, neither of Babbitt's parents had any connection with China. Among Babbitt's family members, the one who did have a China connection was his wife, Dora May Drew. Dora's father, who had held a post in Tianjin, China, married and settled in Shanghai. Dora was born in Shanghai and lived there for several years. It appears that Liang had heard scraps of information about Babbitt's relation with China and then leaped to his own wholly mistaken conclusions. It would not have been difficult for those who did have a close association with Babbitt to illustrate the latter's keen interest in China. For example, Babbitt's house was decorated with Chinese objects, including a Chinese dragon embroidered on a lampshade and Chinese silk accouterments hanging on the wall.<sup>46</sup> That Liang could

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<sup>42</sup> Liang Shiqiu, "How I Began to Write Literary Reviews," *China Times: World* (March 12, 1978).

<sup>43</sup> Liang Shiqiu, "On Irving Babbitt and His Thought," 3.

<sup>44</sup> Liang Shiqiu, "Irving Babbitt and His Humanism." Ningbo is a city in Zhejiang Province.

<sup>45</sup> Liang Shiqiu's *Views on Literature* (China Times Culture Publishing Co. Ltd., 1978), 5.

<sup>46</sup> Panichas, *The Critical Legacy of Irving Babbitt*, 200.

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demonstrate his “close” relationship with Babbitt only through inaccurate hearsay indicates the true nature of their relationship.

For a student to be unfamiliar with a foreign professor’s family history ordinarily would mean little, and the same can be said of a student’s not being on intimate personal terms with that professor. But if Liang feigned a close friendship with Babbitt in order to bask in the professor’s prestige, that would say something about Liang’s personality and character.

It may be illuminating to compare the personalities of Babbitt and Liang. Babbitt stood intellectually largely alone in his time and place. He stuck to his principles and made no concessions to his intellectual opponents. This did not, however, prevent him from keeping his gentlemanly generosity and tolerance. He showed due respect to his rivals in spite of vast differences of opinion, which helped earn him the title in some circles of “New England Saint.” His students at Harvard were not encouraged to agree with him or to oppose the views of others; they were free to be classicists, romanticists, realists, naturalists, or decadents.<sup>47</sup> Even his rival H. L. Mencken confessed in his *Prejudices* that Babbitt did “respect his enemy.”<sup>48</sup> What Mencken said of Babbitt could not have been said of Liang, who also wrote a book called *Prejudices*. Treating Lu Xun insolently, he wrote insulting articles such as the one entitled “Lu Xun and the Ox.” When asked by his students at Qingdao University about the dispute between Lu Xun and himself, Liang “smiled without answer and wrote four Chinese characters, ‘Lu Xun and Ox,’ on the blackboard.” The students “smiled” while he himself remained “self-possessed.”<sup>49</sup> In his debate with Lu Xun, his words were sometimes tinged with such cruelty as to put his opponent’s life in jeopardy. It was the practice of Liang to insinuate that Lu Xun “accepted a subsidy of rubles [the currency of the Soviet Union] from some party [here he was referring to the Communist Party].” Lu Xun responded in his biting essay “The Capitalists’ Stray Cur” that such “criticism” was, in fact, partisan reporting and that such a “profession [of re-

*Liang harsh  
toward Lu  
Xun.*

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<sup>47</sup> Manchester and Odell, eds., *Irving Babbitt: Man and Teacher*, 110.

<sup>48</sup> J. David Hoeveler, Jr., *The New Humanism—A Critique of Modern America, 1900–1940* (The Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia, 1977), 16.

<sup>49</sup> Zang Kejia, “To Mr Liang Shiqiu,” *An Idling Man in His Private Room*, ed. Liu Yansheng (Oriental Publishing Center, 1998), 15.

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porting] is more contemptible than that of the executioner.”<sup>50</sup> Having read in the leftist journal *Bud* an article claiming that Lu Xun “jibed at everything except one ism and one party,” Liang inquired emphatically, “Could this ism be Dr. Sun Yat-sun’s three Principles of the People [the official ideology of the time]? Could this party be the Kuomintang?”<sup>51</sup> At a time when there was life-and-death hostility between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party, Liang’s broad hint that Lu Xun was a communist literally endangered his rival’s life.<sup>52</sup> In his defense, it might be noted that Liang was still a young man of 30 and that he might not have been sophisticated enough to realize that his taunt could get Lu Xun targeted by the Kuomintang authorities. In a spirit of generosity Liang might still be forgiven to a certain extent, but, in his old age when Lu Xun had been dead for more than half a century, instead of repenting of his past excesses toward Lu, Liang wrote that “Lu Xun himself proclaimed there was one ism he did not attack, and when it was enquired what was this ism, and whether it was Communism, Lu Xun gave no answer.”<sup>53</sup> It was through this sort of malice that Liang, who claimed to be a close friend and disciple of Babbitt, helped to sully Babbitt’s image in China.

*Lu Xun never claimed to be tolerant.*

Undoubtedly, Lu Xun was acrid, especially toward Liang and Babbitt. There is a grain of truth in Liang’s statement that Lu Xun was an “‘official of the pen knife’ who was skillful at cutting writing” and had “concise and stinging diction.”<sup>54</sup> Although Lu Xun confessed his emotionalism and stated, “I hope I could avoid that emotionalism,”<sup>55</sup> he never claimed to be tolerant and forgiving. On the contrary, Lu Xun stated that he despised those who assumed themselves tolerant. The last words he left to his wife and son were: “Never stay close to those who claim to be tolerant and

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<sup>50</sup> *The Complete Works of Lu Xun*, vol. 4, 247.

<sup>51</sup> Liang Shiqiu, “Lu Xun and the Ox,” *New Crescent Monthly*, vol. 2, no. 11.

<sup>52</sup> This is not merely alarmism. In the early 1930s, secret agents of the Kuomintang Party did plan to assassinate Lu Xun, but the plan later was aborted. See Zhou Haiying (Lu Xun’s son), *Seventy Years Life with Lu Xun* (Nanhai Publishing House, 2001), 5.

<sup>53</sup> Liang Shiqiu, *About Lu Xun* (Taiwan Ai’mei Literary Publishing House, 1970), 4.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>55</sup> “Appendix to the Bibliography of Lu Xun’s Translations and Works,” *The Complete Works of Lu Xun*, vol. 4, 185.

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against revenge." As for his enemies, he would "forgive none."<sup>56</sup> Yet Lu Xun remained true to his principles. Liang regarded himself as a gentleman like Babbitt; he wrote articles calling for people to act as gentlemen by "treating enemies as friends."<sup>57</sup> On this score he did not always practice what he preached.

Babbitt's humanism has great spiritual, moral, and philosophical depth. If properly reintroduced into China, it could have an immensely positive impact on the development of Chinese life. Partly because of the misfortunes described above, Babbitt's humanism has not gained the niche in the temple of Chinese culture that it deserves and may yet achieve. Fortunately, there are substantial signs that a revival of interest in Babbitt is now well underway in China. Writings by and about Babbitt or related to his ideas are appearing widely. A number of prominent Chinese scholars, working in some cases in cooperation with Western counterparts, are preparing the ground for a major and systematic reexamination of Babbitt's work.

*Babbitt  
revival in  
China augurs  
well for  
future.*

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<sup>56</sup> Lu Xun, "Death," *The Complete Works of Lu Xun*, vol. 4, 612.

<sup>57</sup> Liang Shiqiu, "Gentleman," *New Crescent Monthly*, vol. 1, no. 8.