

Research Article

A Spiritual Evolutionism: Lü Cheng, Aesthetic Revolution, and the Rise of a Buddhism-Inflected Social Ontology in Modern China

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This study examines the early career of the renowned Buddhologist Lü Cheng as an aspiring revolutionary. My findings reveal that Lü's rhetoric of "aesthetic revolution" both catapulted him into the center of the New Culture Movement and popularized a Buddhist idealism—Yogācāra (consciousness-only school)—among thinkers who sought alternatives social theories.

Lü aimed to refute social Darwinism and scientific materialism, which portray humans as mechanized individuals bereft of moral agency. He theorized an anti-realist social ontology, i.e., a social oneness grounded in intersubjective resonances, from which subjective interiority and objective exteriority arise.

Lü turned to Buddhism to further his revolution. Buddhist soteriology supplied powerful tools for theorizing the social: The doctrine of no-self refuted philosophical solipsism and curtailed individualism; dependent-origination refashioned social evolution as collective spiritual progress. Lü's spiritual-evolutionism-cum-social-ontology broadens the field of Buddhist philosophy that has a long-standing blind spot on social philosophies developed in the Global South.

Keywords: Yogācāra; evolutionism; Buddhist soteriology; aesthetics; May Fourth New Culture Movement; anti-realism; social philosophy

On December 15, 1918, during the throes of the New Culture Movement that is often deemed a watershed moment in the making of modern China, a largely unknown art teacher wrote a spirited letter to the flagship journal of the May Fourth Anti-Imperialist Movement, *New Youth* (*Xin qingnian*), calling for an "aesthetic revolution" (*meishu geming* 美術革命) (Lü, January 1919).¹ The editor of *New Youth*, Chen Duxiu (1879–1942)—a renowned progressive thinker and a

¹ The letter was dated December 15, 1918. The title was added by the editor, Chen Duxiu. Lü Cheng himself used *geming* 革命, *gexin* 革新, *gaige* 改革, interchangeably in the letter. Throughout his life, Lü developed an idiosyncratic rhetoric of *geming* "revolution" from its basic sense of fundamental transformation, or literally "change of fate/destiny/life," to his later adoption of a Buddhist soteriological term, *āśrayaparivṛtti*, literally "transformation of basis" or "fundamental transformation," as "revolutionizing consciousness" (Zu 2020). I use "fine arts" and "aesthetics"

would-be co-founder of the Communist Party of China (founded in July 1921), promptly published the letter and broadcasted his unreserved support for an aesthetic revolution. Soon afterward, Liu Haisu (1896–1994), an artist who founded the Shanghai Art Academy—deemed the epicenter of new art education at the time—invited the art teacher to join his academy and work together to revolutionize art and art education. Having moved to the cosmopolitan city of Shanghai, the art teacher not only introduced a wide range of Western aesthetics to Chinese readers but also published several of the earliest essays and monographs that laid the foundation for the academic discipline of aesthetic studies in modern China (Lü, February & March 1922).²

The art teacher was none other than Lü Cheng 呂澂 (1896–1989). He would soon be recognized as the most erudite Buddhologist of modern China.³ At the time, Lü was already proficient in Japanese, English, and French. He was also able to read German with the help of Japanese translation. His language skills provided him direct access to the riches of Western thought. A few years after he moved to Shanghai, he acquired research proficiency in Sanskrit, Pāli, and classical Tibetan, enabling him to incorporate cutting-edge philological methods into his Yogācāra (consciousness-only) studies (Lin 2014; Lusthaus 2014). In July 1922, when the China Inner Learning Institute (Zhina neixue yuan 支那內學院)—the hub of Yogācāra revival—opened its door, Lü became its provost. In 1943, Lü became the leader of the institute and launched his own training program, *Five Disciplines of Buddhist Studies* (Wuke foxue 五科佛學), where he redefined sociality as Yogācāra intersubjectivity grounded in storehouse consciousness (Ch: *zangshi* 藏識; Skt: *ālayavijñāna*), redesigned Yogācāra bodhisattva vinaya as rules for democratic deliberation, and refashioned social evolution in terms of the soteriological process of revolutionizing consciousness (Ch: *zhuanyi* 轉依; Skt: *āśrayaparivṛtti*) (Zu 2020).

Lü's scholarly achievements, though mostly unknown to Western academics, are well respected by contemporary Chinese and Japanese scholars of Buddhism. Lü's multilingual edition of a new abridged Buddhist canon, *Zangyao* 藏要, remains the most understudied modern Buddhist

interchangeably in translating *meishu* 美術. This is because 1) fine arts have played a key role in the emergence of academic studies of aesthetics (Kristeller 1951) and 2) Lü Cheng was well-versed in the historical relation between fine arts and aesthetics, and used both senses of *meishu* interchangeably.

² In these essays, Lü introduced a wide range of Western aesthetic movements to Chinese students. Below is a partial list of important works that Lü introduced to Chinese readers: George Santayana's 1896 *The Sense of Beauty*; Bernard Bosanquet's 1915 *Three lectures on Aesthetics*; Kaarle Laurila's *Zur Theorie der ästhetischen Gefühle*; Theodor Lipps's 1903 *Asthetik*; Inagaki Suematsu's 1921 *Bigaku hanron*; Richard Hamann's 1915 *Zur Begründung der Ästhetik*; Benedetto Croce's 1902 *Esthetica*; Oskar Bie's 1895 *Zwischen den Künsten*; Hermann Cohen's *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls*; Conrad Fiedler's 1887 *Der Ursprung der Künstlerischen Tätigkeit*; Max Dessoir's 1906 *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*; Karl Groos's 1892 *Einleitung in die Aesthetik*; Georg Friedrich Hegel's 1826 *Philosophie der Kunst oder Ästhetik*; Kant's 1790 *Kritik der Urteilskraft*; Edward von Hartmann's *Philosophie des Schönen*; Konrad von Lange's 1902 *Das Wesen der Kunst*; Henry Marshall's 1895 *Aesthetic Principles*; Ethel Puffer Howes's 1905 *The Psychology of Beauty*; Johanness Immanuel Volkelt's 1895 *Ästhetische Zeitfragen*; Wilhelm Wundt's *Kunst and Völkerpsychologie*; Guyau's *L'art au point de vue sociologique*; Yrjö Hirn's 1901 *The Origins of Art*; Ernst Grosse's 1894 *Die Anfänge der Kunst*; Paul Gaultier's 1911 *Le sens de l'art*; Jonas Cohn's *Allgemeine Ästhetik*; Eleonore Kühn's 1908 *Das problem der ästhetischen Autonomie*.

³ The laudatory titles awarded him since the 1930s include “guru of Buddhist learning” (foxue dashi 佛學大師), “maestro of Buddhist learning” (foxue taidou 佛學泰斗), and “expert of Buddhist learning” (foxue jia 佛學家).

textual production despite its high standard of textual-philological criticism. Lü's contribution to the revival of Buddhist logic (Ch: *yinming* 因明; Skt: *hetuvidyā*) also remains mostly unknown in Western academia (Lin 2014: 349–351).

Despite Lü's pivotal role in the rise of Yogācāra in modern China, systematic studies of his thought remain rare in both Chinese and English scholarship. Furthermore, studies of Lü to date primarily treat him as a scholar of Buddhism and omit his early adventure into Western aesthetics. This study reconsiders the rise of Yogācāra in modern China by tracing the early career of Lü Cheng as a May Fourth revolutionary from 1918 to 1923. My findings reveal that Lü's early foray into Western aesthetics paved the way to his lifelong endeavor to reinvent Buddhist soteriology (path of liberation) as a way of building an ideal society without the pitfalls of excessive materialism and rampant individualism.

As I demonstrate, Lü's transition from aesthetic revolution to Yogācāra reveals much about the lure of Buddhist idealism in a scientific world: Consciousness-only philosophy proved a compelling theory of social evolution that opened up new means of formulating both sides of the imported social-individual antinomy. In Lü's interpretation, ancient Yogācāra intersubjectivity proves a futile ground from which various worldly dichotomies of the social and the individual, objectivity and subjectivity, as well as the external world and the inner psyche, arise. Thus, in Lü's eyes, Buddhist path of liberation, specifically the doctrine of non-duality and spiritual exercises to reach that non-duality, could offer a viable path out of the modern impasse resulted from unsubstantiated binary categories. After launching a potent philosophical critique and an incisive moral critique of Darwinist competition, Lü eventually turned to the well-equipped Yogācāra soteriological toolbox for initiating a social evolution-cum-revolution by transforming consciousness (Ch: *zhuanyi* 轉依; Skt: *āśrayaparivṛtti*).

Examining the rise of Yogācāra in the context of the May Fourth disillusionment with social Darwinism and scientism, this study uncovers the appeal of consciousness-only thoughts as the philosophical foundation of a spiritual evolutionism. To date, most scholars have treated the modern reconfiguration of Yogācāra as the ascent of an indigenous philosophy spurred by imports of Western science, philosophy, and Buddhology (Cheng 2000; Zhang 2012; Lin 1997; Aviv 2020; Makeham 2014). Collectively, these studies of Yogācāra philosophy have undoubtedly helped establish Buddhist philosophy as a respectable subject of scholarly pursuit on par with Western philosophy and partially restored Yogācāra into the intellectual history of modern China. Building upon these recent achievements, the current study pushes the subfield of Buddhist philosophy further by unveiling a Buddhism-inflected social ontology. Using Lü's case as a window, I show that the rise of Yogācāra in modern China stemmed not only from the magnetism of a sophisticated philosophical system but also from the appeal of Yogācāra as an alternative social theory of evolution-cum-revolution outside the Darwinist dystopia of “survival of the fittest.”

This study starts with an analysis of Lü Cheng's debut on the May Fourth intellectual stage, i.e., his call for an aesthetic revolution. I demonstrate how Lü's anti-realist agenda gestured toward a rebuttal of social Darwinism and scientific realism that both objectifies nature as resources to be controlled and portrays human beings as mechanized subjects bereft of life force. I conclude this

section with a review of the broader intellectual shift, i.e., the rise of “society” as an independent category of scholarly analysis and the concomitant debates on the ontological status of “social group” and “social facts.”

In sections two and three, I tease out Lü’s creative misreading of Western aesthetics together with his early theorization of aesthetic translation and an anti-realist social totality. I argue that Lü’s revolutionary vision was nurtured by the same question posed by French thinkers that led to the rise of Durkheimian sociology: How to build a stronger solidarity as the foundation of Republicanism? I further point out that, instead of blindly buying into the dominant May Fourth realism, Lü chose the less intuitive path of positing a social oneness grounded in intersubjective resonances.

To further outline Lü anti-realist social ontology, in section four, I analyze Lü’s critique of the Chinese interpretation of Deweyan pragmatism. Section four also illustrates one of “wrong” paths that Lü sought to dismantle: the widespread yet unexamined faith in naturalism and scientific realism that Lü thought reified the graspings of material things.

To understand his transition into Yogācāra studies, in sections five and six, I explain how Lü refuted another “wrong” path of renewing China: the equally indigenous vitalism that credulously bought into a moralization of the Bergsonian philosophy of the occult self (Ciaudo 2013; Ciaudo 2016). In section five, I explain how the rise of Bergsonian creative evolution stimulated the development of Chinese vitalism and the rise of a “scientific” Yogācāra. Then in section six, I analyze Lü’s theorization of an agentless moral agency.

The primary materials that I examine in sections five and six are Lü’s debate with the renowned late-Qing revolutionary Zhang Taiyan (1868–1936) on Yogācāra and Bergsonism from 1921 to 1922. As I show, ostensibly, Lü Cheng joined the conversation to repudiate Zhang’s manufacturing of a false doctrinal equivalence between *ālayavijñāna* (storehouse consciousness) and Bergsonian *élan vital* (vital impetus). However, when juxtaposed with Lü’s revolutionary aspiration, it becomes evident that soteriology occupied the heart in Lü’s philosophical critique: He sought to disrupt Darwinist beliefs about evolution and rein in materialism and solipsism.

I conclude in the last section by further pointing out the broader implications of Lü’s social ontology: Lü’s debate with Zhang Taiyan popularized Yogācāra among the May Fourth thinkers as a viable middle-way alternative to both social Darwinism and Bergsonian creative evolution and thus gave birth to a Buddhism-inflected spiritual evolutionism.

By unpacking the entanglement of the idiosyncratic rhetoric of revolution and Yogācāra in Lü’s early career, this study looks beyond the “set of basically mythical binaries” that have limited scholarly inquiries of modern Buddhism (Josephson-Storm 2017: 10). Informed by the recent scholarly effort to correct the secular lens that hinders a balanced understanding of China’s modern transformation (Nedostup 2009; Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Aviv 2014; Kiely 2014; Ying 2018), the current study extends the analytic gaze to an earlier effort to undercut the imported binaries such as “conservative” and “radical,” “secular” and “religious,” and hence offers a rare glimpse of the raw human struggle to fashion new possibilities of living together in the Darwinist world and to create meaning in a scientific universe.

Revolution of the Mind-Heart and Lü's Debut on the May Fourth Stage

From its inception, Lü's revolution was an anti-realist critique of the rise of a capitalist consumer culture. In his letter to *New Youth*, Lü identified his revolution as a revolt against the commercialization of art. Lü saw revolution as a moral awakening that enables the common folk to appreciate the universal Beauty. In Lü's revolution, once the commoners gain access to this universal Beauty, they would naturally know how to differentiate right and wrong and commit themselves to proper cultivation. The outcome of this moral awakening-cum-revolution, in Lü's vision, would be an ideal society held together by a renewed aesthetic appreciation (Lü, January 1919: 85).

Lü's vision stood out as a revolution sustained by rigorous studies and proceeded in measured steps. While this may contradict the common perception of revolution as a violent political revolt, it is undeniable that such optimism for profound transformation was in sync with the May Fourth crucible of cultural renewal. Indeed, one central strain of thought during this time was a reappraisal of the 1911 overthrow of the Qing dynasty. The 1911 Xinhai Revolution was followed by decades of violence and trauma: ceaseless battles among warlords, incompetent governance, callous treatment of the poor, and human-made atrocities exacerbated by regional floods, droughts, famines, plagues, and other natural disasters. Violence seemed to beget more violence. Under this climate of unending violence and chaos, many intellectuals looked elsewhere for alternative cultural means to invigorate the Chinese mind. Many firmly believed that real revolutionaries were in it for the long haul, toiling for gradual spiritual invigoration over short-lived political band-aids. Aesthetics, for Lü Cheng and many May Fourth youth alike, was one of many promising avenues of cultivating a new social consciousness and nurturing a new form of upwardly expanding communal life, where upwardness was defined in opposition to traditional moral order while maintaining a sense of self-perfection (Wang 2001: 192–194).

Against this backdrop of a widespread disillusionment about political reform and a yearning for a deeper cultural renewal, the import of Lü's revolution also became evident: In one of many competing yet mutually reinforcing subcultures of May Fourth, Lü pioneered a revolution of the mind-heart. The tenet of this revolution of the mind-heart was to eradicate social corruptions with art, aesthetic attitude, sustained education, and life-long learning. When he wrote the letter to *New Youth*, he was still an unknown art teacher in a high school in Xuzhou徐州, a town 300 miles south of Beijing and 300 miles north of Shanghai (Lü 1959: 77–78). But he nonetheless dared to propose a total revamp of the commercialized society through art and comparative study.

Lü used a well-known avant-garde moment, Futurism, to make his case to the editors and readers of *New Youth*. Futurism gained its name from the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Manifesto del Futurismo* (*The Manifesto of Futurism*) in 1909. As is well-known, Futurism was a long-lived modernist movement that rejected anything old and celebrated youth, speed, machinery, and industry (Bru, Somigli, and van den Bossche 2017: 1–12). The Futurists reinvented every imaginable medium, including poetry, performance, film, industrial design, painting, sculpture, and architecture. To further urge the editor to “shoulder the responsibility of initiating aesthetic revolution” (*yin meishu geming wei jize* 引美術革命為己責), Lü prophesied a bright future for *New Youth* as the Chinese counterpart of *Poesia*, the poetry magazine that first published *Manifesto del*

Futurismo (Lü, January 1919: 85). Lü's analogy not only works well with *New Youth's* self-presentation but also portrays a future of powerful impact for the periodical. The editor Chen Duxiu noted this letter from an obscure art teacher in some high school in an inland town, promptly published it, and appended it with his full support.

Lü fused aesthetics with ethics and Beauty with Truth. He prescribed a long and difficult revolution, one that is only achievable through scholarly endeavors. Many features in this blueprint persisted in his later effort to initiate a Yogācāra revolution of the consciousness. Instead of laying out a utopian vision, Lü recommended a methodology to search for universal aesthetic principles. For Lü, “the path of revolution” (*geming zhi dao* 革命之道) begins with inquiries into and illustrations of the scope and essence of aesthetics (*chanming meishu zhi fanwei yu shizhi* 闡明美術之範圍與實質), entails a search for “the truly authentic [evaluations] of right and wrong” (*zhenzheng zhi shifei* 真正之是非), and enables “the [larger] society to understand the truth path of aesthetics” (*shehui zhi meishu zhi zhengtu* 社會知美術之正途) (Lü, January 1919: 85). Lü laid out four steps of this revolutionary path, whose core is conducting rigorous comparative studies of aesthetics from the past to the present and across different cultures in order to identify the mainstream and thereby reveal principles of right and wrong. This moral concern would take center stage in his life-long endeavor to transform the world.

The surprising purchase of Lü's idiosyncratic definition of revolution in *New Youth* unsettles the taken-for-granted definition of revolution as a violent overthrow of the past and uncovers a forgotten alternative revolution erased from Chinese official history. In Lü's revolutionary vision, the essence of a fundamental change of destiny is taking responsibility for the shared past and taking on the responsibility for engendering a new world as it should be. Taking responsibility for what is given necessitates an in-depth observation of current situations. Lü singled out two modern vices that required immediate action. One was the “profiteering” (*sushi wuli* 俗士鷺利) of art as embodied in the commercialization of the paintings of maidens; the other was the proliferation of homespun art institutions and shallow magazines flaunting themselves as champions of aesthetic education. Lü sounded the alarm that, without an aesthetic revolution, “the commoners' aesthetic sensibility will completely deviate from the right path of cultivation” (*hengren zhi meiqing, xi shi qi zhengyang* 恆人之美情, 悉失其正養) (Lü, January 1919: 85). In short, Lü's defined revolution as a fundamental moral awakening. He maintained this idiosyncratic vision until 1949 when he read Mao Zetong's works and admitted that “only then had [I] gained deeper understanding of the meaning of revolution” (*duiyu geming de yiyi caiyou jiaoshen de renshi* 對於革命的意義才有較深的認識) (Lü 1959: 78).

Nevertheless, Lü's revolutionary path stood out because he refrained from offering a panacea to cure China's modern vices but instead proposed a collective path to search for a solution together with all those who were willing to practice careful scholarship. When taking on the responsibility for engendering what should be, the first step for Lü was to diagnose. Lü pinpointed the main culprit of China's modern depravity as “superficial learning and arbitrary judgment” (*qianxue wuduan* 淺學武斷) that led to the proliferation of “teachings of specious analogies” (*sishi er fei zhi jiaoshou* 似是而非之教授) and “comments based on piecemeal knowledge” (*yizhi banjie zhi yanlun* 一知半解之言論) (Lü,

January 1919: 85). Lü wanted his readers to see that, to cure such a root problem, one must follow the path of moral awakening assisted by diligent studies.

Lü's letter to *New Youth* not only catapulted him into the center of the New Culture Movement but also won him unexpected admiration. The renowned avant-garde artist Liu Haisu, having read Lü's letter, invited Lü to join his Shanghai Art Academy, the hub of the new art movement in modern China (Lü 1959: 78). Once there, Lü not only obtained an influential platform to advance his revolution but was also initiated into a vibrant network of like-minded reformers. As the chief editor of *Fine Arts* (*Meishu* 美術), the leading publishing venue of Liu Haisu's academy, Lü turned the focus of *Fine Arts* from artistic practices and techniques to aesthetic theories. He also started a series of lectures in Shanghai, a city that was simultaneously the hub of new international religious establishments and new Buddhist movements in Republican China. Lü later edited and published these lecture notes as books, which became the earliest academic monographs on aesthetics in modern China. Meanwhile, the community of the Shanghai Art Academy also decisively shaped Lü's intellectual outlook and social theory.

Before diving into detailed analyses of Lü's anti-realist social ontology, it is helpful to outline the rise of society and social facts during early twentieth-century China as an independent category of analysis, freed from its premodern overseers in the political, economic, and cosmological spheres. This is not to say that there were no grassroots organizations that were relatively independent from the state organs of the imperial court. Indeed, scholars have long recognized that before the rise of the nation-state, there existed many local self-governing communities. These communities formed a "cultural nexus of power" that sustained a public realm (Duara 1988). However, it is important to note that with the rise and expansion of the nation-state and the importation of Western concepts such as democracy and civil society, many Chinese thinkers became increasingly aware of the prospect of forming autonomous social organizations that would strive to maintain their independence from the political system (Yang 2019; Lam 2011; Liu 1995).

Nevertheless, to date, scholars have not explored the rich philosophical debates on the ontological status of the social: What constitutes a social entity? What are the metaphysical sources of social reality? At first glance, the Chinese debate was shaped by European discourses and centers on the following questions: What is the ontological status of social groups (*qun* 群)? Is a social group distinct from the collection of its individual members?⁴ By and large, the debates about social ontology in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century focused on the antinomy of the individual and the social.⁵ However, more careful scholars could notice that the Chinese debate on social ontology took on a different focus than those of their European counterparts. In the 1920s and 1930s, there was a debate of matter (*wuzhi* 物質) and mind (*jingshen* 精神) that was indicative of the larger

⁴ The earliest recorded discussion about social ontology appeared in Yan Fu's 嚴復 1897 *Qunxue yiyen* 群學肄言, a translation-cum-commentary of Herbert Spencer's 1873 *The Study of Sociology*.

⁵ For an overview of social ontology in the European intellectual traditions, especially with regard to Tarde's individualism vs. Durkheim's holism, see Brian Epstein, "Social Ontology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/social-ontology/>

philosophical showdown between materialism (*weiwu zhuyi* 唯物主義) and idealism (*weixin zhuyi* 唯心主義) (Hammerstrom 2015: 128–149). This context rendered it inevitable that the central issue of social ontology in the 1920s China was a debate between idealist and materialist social ontology. The outcome of this philosophical showdown is well-known: Marxism and historical materialism won. Under the shadow of historical materialism, anti-realist social ontologies were soon erased from the collective memory. Thus, the current study takes the first step to recover these forgotten social ontologies and to tell a new history of how we ended up with scientific realism and historical materialism by restoring Buddhist social philosophy in both the intellectual history of modern China and the subfield of Buddhist philosophy.

The Social Function of Aesthetics: From Empathy to Intersubjectivity

During his time at the Shanghai Art Academy, Lü's interpretation of aesthetics took a decisive turn toward social theory. The seeds of moral awakening in his 1919 letter gradually sprouted into a well-developed anti-realist social ontology. Lü's anti-realism is most clearly expressed in a 1920 essay expounding Theodor Lipps's psychological study of aesthetics. In this essay, Lü argued that both aesthetic empathy (*mei de tongqing* 美的同情) and aesthetic antipathy (*mei de fanqing* 美的反情) are based on empathetic exchanges (Ch: *ganqing yiru* 感情移入; German: *Einfühlung*), which in turn is grounded in the artist's personality (*renge* 人格) (Lü 1920). During his years at the Shanghai Art Academy, Lü gradually merged the concept of the artist's personality with the concept of "an aesthetic life" (*mei de rensheng* 美的人生), in which aesthetic empathy is the key to enable a mutual-appreciative collective expansion of multiple lives, "just like the blossoming wild flowers in the mountains, growing in the same air and the same soil" (*zhengxiangshi shanjian yipian yehua kai, zai tongyi de kongqi li, tongyi de turang shang* 正像是山間一片野花開, 在同一的空氣裡, 同一的土壤上) (Lü, May 1922: 29). In his May 1922 essay, Lü further argued that empathy grows out of both an appreciation of things as-is and a recognition of the desire for life inherent in all sentient beings. He did not doubt that only deep contemplation could nurture this empathy. He trusted that only by genuinely appreciating all conscious existences, including humans and animals, could one fully develop one's own spiritual potential. Moreover, on multiple occasions, he prophesied that only by outwardly expressing this upwardness (defined as the opposite of selfish tendencies) could one transform a society ensnared in cold-hearted calculations of chances of survival (Lü, March 1922: 6–7; Lü, May 1922: 31–34; Lü, January 1923).

Lü's social turn grew out of his readings of the French philosopher Jean-Marie Guyau's (1854–1888) sociology of aesthetics. Borrowing from this talented yet short-lived philosopher, Lü argued that art and aesthetics, by definition, are to employ intersubjective empathy to expand sociality (*neng jizhe ganqing kuoda shehuixing de, jiushi yishu* 能藉者感情擴大社會性的, 就是藝術) (Lü, March 1922: 1).⁶ In Lü's paradigm, the heuristic goal is not to enable more creativity but to engender a turn away from one's petty ego and to instill a love for all living forms. Only then, Lü prophesied, can fully

⁶ In this article, Lü Cheng cited Jean-Marie Guyau to substantiate his claim. Guyau argued that the purpose of art is not pleasure, but to create sympathy among members of a society (Ansell-Pearson 2015: 207, 217).

dynamic and expanding living experiences become possible. Lü termed these living experiences “an aesthetic life” (*mei de rensheng* 美的人生) (Lü, May 1922: 20, 27–28, 32–35; Lü, October 1922: 1–2).

Scholars of religious studies would recognize an uncanny resonance between Lü’s aesthetic resonances and Durkheimian collective effervescence, a simultaneous coming-together that enables a community to think transcendently as one. In contrast with the role of ritual in Durkheimian sociology, artistic creation functioned to bind people together in Lü’s social ontology. Behind this surface semblance, there is also a common thread. Both thinkers owe their initial theorization of the social totality to Guyau. It is well-known that Durkheim’s first documented conception of a social totality came from his critique of Guyau’s *L’irréligion de l’avenir: étude sociologique* (*The Non-religion of the Future: A Sociological Study*) (Behrent 2008.1; Harding 1973: 112–113). Similarly, Guyau also sparked Lü’s initial theorization of social dynamics in its totality.

This convergence of interests stemmed from their rethinking of the meaning of revolution. Both Durkheim and Lü rode the tide of a rethinking of communal living in the wake of violent political overthrows. In the 1880s, after the failure of the 1848 revolution, the ensuing monarchist rule of Napoleon III, and the re-establishment of Republicanism in the 1870s, many French thinkers sought to establish a stronger solidarity than what could be achieved by social contract and individual rights; Guyau and Durkheim included (Behrent 2008.2: 219–220; Donzelot 1984: 74–86). As sympathizers of the French Revolution, both Guyau and Durkheim reconceived religion as the sum of all social relations in their struggle to theorize stronger ties for building Republicanism.

In early twentieth-century China, the multi-faceted French Revolution was merged with the Enlightenment ideals and social Darwinism. In particular, the term “revolution” had already merged with the logic of global capitalism that saw the revolution as a fruit of the Enlightenment, as the unfolding of the progress of the human mind, and, more importantly, as part of the discourse of civilization that ranked nations and peoples along an evolutionary timeline (Murthy 2011: 54–55). Consequently, to justify the Chinese revolution, many intellectuals employed the logic of social Darwinism (Yü 1994: 134). Hence, during the May Fourth era, revolution merged with evolution, both of which were justified in terms of reason, scientific realism, material wealth, and economic progress.

Against the mainstream of justifying evolution-cum-revolution on scientism and material progress, Lü redefined evolution-cum-revolution in terms of intersubjective resonance that would bring people closer and transform them through intersubjective empathy. In contrast to Durkheim’s faith in the objective reality of social facts, for Lü, what unites human beings into a oneness was NOT an objective outside. Instead, Lü believed that both objective existence and subjective experience were manifestations of Beauty and Truth, a universal that could only be assembled by purposeful actions to establish intersubjective accord.

To theorize an intersubjective social oneness without falling into the false dichotomy of mind and matter, Lü had to assemble diverse Western philosophies into one. To illustrate Lü’s social theory, in the rest of this section and the next section, I analyze Lü’s interpretations of Guyau, Lipps, Helmholtz, and Pater. Furthermore, I compare Lü’s theorization of the universal with Walter Benjamin’s work, highlighting their shared philosophical propensity of seeing the universal as

interconnected processes. This propensity to understand the universal in terms of processes will prove crucial to Lü's turn away from social ontology and toward Buddhist soteriology.

In imagining a social totality, Lü was inspired by Guyau's 1887 work *L'art au point de vue sociologique* (Lü 1931: appendix).⁷ In this book, Guyau first identified common bases between aesthetics and ethics and then argued that the purpose of art is to create sympathy among members of a society (Harding 1973: 126–127).

To theorize intersubjectivity with a firmer philosophical ground, Lü appropriated strands of thought from Theodor Lipps. In Europe and North America, Lipps is well known for theorizing empathy as a primary epistemic means of perceiving other humans as independent consciousnesses, primarily due to his influence on the Freudian theorization of the unconscious and his indirect impact on the rise of Husserlian phenomenology (Stueber 2018).⁸ Similarly, Lipps's Japanese commenter Abe Jirō (1883–1959) focused more on the function of Lippsian empathy in eliciting emotional responses from artwork and nature (Hijikata 2001: 197–203; Ōishi 2005). Lü Cheng's reading of Lipps departed from both Lipps's authorial intent and that of Japanese translators-cum-interpreters. Instead, Lü appropriated Lippsian empathy to establish the possibility and ensure the endurance of intersubjective accord.⁹

What undergirds Lü Cheng's propensity to read Lipps and Guyau as social theorists was his desire to build a social totality without falling into the mythical dichotomy of mind and matter. Lü strived to find a universal aesthetic principle to bridge the divide in the study of Beauty between the subjective (Lippsian psychological approach and Bergsonian *élan vital*) and the objective (Guyau's sociological approach) (Lü, February 1922: 2). Echoing Guyau, Lü claimed that “the ultimate social meaning of art is to awaken the empathetic accord in people's mind-heart. Building upon [that awakening], [people] could establish another kind of just and reliable society” (*yishu zuigao de shehui yiyi, bianshi huanqi renxinli ganqing de yizhi, cong nashangmian lingwai jianshe yizhong zhengdang de bingqie qieshi de shehui* 藝術最高的社會意義，便是喚起人心裏感情的一致，從那上面另外建設一種正當的並且確實的社會) (Lü, March 1922: 3). In sum, Guyau inspired Lü to imagine a society in its totality. Lipps provided Lü a ready-to-hand tool to assemble lasting social relations grounded in aesthetic empathy.

The Social Function of Translation: Assembling an Intersubjective Oneness

Unsatisfied with Lippsian empathy, Lü further experimented with a different mechanism for assembling intersubjective oneness: aesthetic translation. Rather than defining translation as a

⁷ In his footnote 6 of this appendix, Lü referenced Ōishi Yoshinori's Japanese translation together with the French original, and another of Guyau's works in French, *Les problèmes de l'esthétique contemporaine*, 6th ed. 1904.

⁸ Theodor Lipps not only inspired the Freudian theorization of the unconscious but also played a key role in the rise of Husserlian phenomenology: This accidental influence occurred because a group of his students in Munich rebelled against Lippsian psychologism and championed Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen* as their philosophical bible. Both schools of Western thought have been employed as interpretative lenses through which to analyze various strands of Yogācāra philosophy.

⁹ Harding (1973: 57–76, 114) also noted the resonances between Lippsian empathy and Guyau's socio-emotional function of aesthetics.

movement from a target language to a host language, Lü theorized translation as a concerted and purposeful act of consciousness that renders universal Beauty and social oneness perceptible to all. Taking the physicist Helmholtz's theory of color out of context, Lü claimed that "with regard to nature, artists employ their unique languages and writings to transpose and translate it" (*yishujia zhi yu ziran gu geyong qi dute zhi yuyan wenzi er xiang yiyi ye* 藝術家之於自然固各用其獨特之語言文字而相逡譯也) (Lü, January 1923: 55).¹⁰ In other words, Lü believed that all artistic creations are merely subjective translations of nature and every artwork is mere self-expression, through and through. More importantly, in Lü's theorization, art itself becomes a process of translation, whose sole task is to translate the universal Beauty into unique aesthetic languages comprehensible to commoners.

To appreciate the significance of Lü's theorization of aesthetic translation as the process to assemble social oneness, it is informative to compare Lü's aesthetic translation with Benjamin's renowned 1921 essay "The Task of the Translator." To be sure, there is no evidence that Lü and Benjamin knew each other's translation theories. However, the striking parallels between these two translation theories warrant scholarly attention. While Benjamin refashioned translation as a form of art that constantly recreate language itself (1996: 256), Lü made art itself an unceasing process of translation. While Benjamin conceptualized a "pure language" and posited that each natural language could only capture a section of this wholeness (1996: 257), Lü conceptualized a universal Beauty and posited that each artwork could only convey a partial aspect of the universal. While Benjamin claimed the sole task of the translator as one of assembling the pure language inherent in all writings (1996: 261), Lü claimed the sole task of artists, art critics, and artwork as one of awakening the universal Beauty inherent in all sentient beings. Although their goals diverged significantly, i.e., Benjamin's quest for a pure language vs. Lü's intersubjective social oneness, it is important to recognize that, for both thinkers, universality is no longer an ontological category but instead a process of ceaseless conscious actions of translation. This understanding of oneness as dynamic processes enables Lü's later fusion of revolution with evolution and social ontology with Buddhist soteriology.

In Lü's translation theory, not only art itself but also art criticism ought to be the task of the translator. Lü advocated this theory in a series of letters written in October 1921 and published in the May 1922 issue of *Fine Arts*. In these letters, he argued that the task of art criticism was two-pronged. First, "true critique is an aesthetic creation" (*zhenzheng de piping bianshi yizhong meishu de chuangzuo* 真正的批評便是一種美術的創作) (Lü and Tang, May 1922: 154). Therefore, criticism was not about evaluating an artwork. Instead "art critics translate existing artistic creation into literary creation" (*pipingjia jiang yiyou de meishu chuangzuo fanyi cheng wenzi de chuangzuo* 批評家將已有的美術創作翻譯成文字的創作) (Lü and Tang, May 1922: 155). Second, the social function of art criticism is to deepen commoners' appreciation of artwork (*pipingjia biding zhanzai zuojia he minzhong zhongjian cai*

¹⁰ Helmholtz is known for his argument that aesthetic induction is a mode of knowing unique to human sciences, which is non-reducible but complimentary to the dominant way of knowing in natural sciences—logical induction. Helmholtz (1881: 9) advocates a particular way of artists' portraying the surroundings of objects in paintings: "The artist cannot transcribe nature; he must translate her; yet this translation may give us an impression in the highest degree distinct and forcible." Lü borrowed this statement.

you yiyi ... shi minzhong mingbai zhe zuopin de jiazhi youwu 批評家必定站在作家和民眾中間才有意義... 使民眾明白這作品的價值有無) (Lü and Tang, May 1922: 155–156). He further argued that “art critics must be sufficiently cultivated so to enable empathy to arise in every aspect... Only empathetic elucidation is true criticism” (*pipingjia yao you chongfen de xiuyang neng rongde gefangmian de tongqing shengqi . . . weiyou tongqing de shuoming caishi zhenzheng de piping* 批評家要有充分的修養能容得各方面的同情生起...唯有同情的說明才是真正的批評) (Lü and Tang, May 1922: 162). In Lü’s paradigm, art criticism as translation is meaningful exactly because its in-betweenness promises a communal cohesion, fusing the minds of artists with the masses through aesthetic empathy.

In contrast with the dominant May Fourth imagination of a social totality governed by objective laws, Lü imagined a social oneness assembled through aesthetic principles and manifested through the concerted intersubjective acts of aesthetic translation. The social function of artists, art critics, and artworks, according to Lü, is to awaken aesthetic sensibility in the commoners. Borrowing from the famous predecessor of the Aesthetic Movement, Walter Horatio Pater (1839–1894), Lü defined aesthetic sensibility as “the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects” (Lü, March 1921: 2; Pater 1873: preface). Lü valued Pater for his successful theorization of art as a pure psychological experience. As a leading advocate of Aestheticism, who championed “art for art’s sake,” Pater convincingly carved out an art realm purely grounded in subjective occurrences and independent from the objective world (Lambourne 1996: 12; Pater 1873: preface). To be sure, Pater never intended his theory to establish a social oneness. On the contrary, Pater theorized artistic sensibility to champion individuality. Nonetheless, this purely experiential explanation of Beauty proved a convenient tool for Lü to free aesthetic appreciation from the confines of an objective outside and to establish the validity of intersubjective accord.

Lü further argued that the responsibility of assembling intersubjective accord should be shouldered not only by artists and art critics but also commoners. Extending Pater’s aesthetic sensibility into the realm of the social, Lü posited that when commoners develop aesthetic sensibility, they become connoisseurs (*jianshang zhe* 鑑賞者) (Lü and Tang, May 1922: 154, 162). Lü further argued that, when a connoisseur appreciates Beauty through sensibility, the temperament of the artist is then recreated in the connoisseur’s consciousness. This recreation then expands the connoisseur’s perceptual world. In Lü’s social ontology, the true value of artwork and aesthetics lies in their social function because artists enable the expansion of personality through aesthetic experiences of artworks (*zuojia de renge quan chongxian zai guanzhe yishi li, guanzhe de renge he ta ronghe gengjia kuoda—zhe haoshuo shi yishu de yizhong shehuixing, yishu de zhenzheng jiazhi bianzai zhe shangmian* 作家的人格全重現在觀者意識裏，觀者的人格和他融合更加擴大—這好說是藝術的一種社會性，藝術的真正價值便在這上面) (Lü, March 1921: 3). Consequently, Lü posited that a community emerges through repeated occurrences of intersubjective translation.

Against Nature Piety: Enchanting Social Relations with Aesthetic Empathy

Lü challenged May Fourth intellectuals who saw realism and nature as the saviors of China. He questioned whether the faith in realism and the edifying power of nature could lead to a viable path out of China’s crisis. Lü made public his critique of realism when he was drafted by Li Shicen 李石岑

(1892–1934), the editor of the well-known periodical, the *People's Bell* (*Minduo* 民鐸). Li wanted Lü to comment on the renowned May Fourth thinker, the modern educator of China, Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940) and his aesthetic education. Cai demanded not only that institutionalized religion should be replaced by aesthetic education, but also that religious beliefs must be verified by science and explained in observable terms (Gildow 2018; Duiker, 1977). Against the increasing sway of realism as embodied by Cai, Lü denied the viability of replacing spiritual cultivation with art education and argued that true aesthetic education should aim to actualize an aesthetic human life (Lü, October 1922: 7; Lü, January 1922: 1).

Lü was convinced that natural piety as embodied in one's emotional experiences of both nature and man-made environments such as art museums, art exhibitions, theatres, music halls was merely a perception contaminated by petty ego, which was itself an unconscious habit that expands one's possessive desires (*zhanjuyu bianxiang de kuozhang* 佔據慾變相的擴張). Lü argued that uncritical trust in nature represents another ignorant entanglement mired in this Darwinist world, leading to “the actual society” (*xianzhuang shehui* 現狀社會) that is organized based on a few persons' possessive desires and the corresponding “actual human life” (*xianzhuang rensheng* 現狀人生) that is fundamentally at odds with an aesthetic life (Lü, October 1922: 5–8).

To further emphasize the imperative to break with this actual life grounded in naïve trust in nature, Lü distinguished two kinds of creativity that were at odds with each other: One is generated by egoistic desires in everyday life, and the other springs from an aesthetic attitude grounded in deep appreciation for all living beings (Lü, October 1922: 7). Unlike Cai, who prophesied that religion ought to be replaced by art education as the human civilization progresses, Lü saw an irreconcilable contradiction between the Darwinist survival of the fittest and an aesthetic spirituality. For Lü, aesthetic spirituality functioned to inject moral agency back into social interactions and so, he argued, aesthetic educators must “engage in social reform” (*qu congshi shehui gaizao de yundong* 去從事社會改造的運動) (Lü, October 1922: 8).

Lü chose to respond publicly to Cai's project because he deemed Cai's proposal ineffective for revolutionizing consciousness. In the same October 1922 essay, Lü explicitly denounced Cai's natural piety by pointing out the impossibility of “building up various pleasant environments and waiting quietly for the natural transformative effects [of these environments]” (Lü, October 1922: 7). In Lü's eyes, artwork in its material form was merely one segment of the transcendent totality of an aesthetic life. Moreover, the value of artwork could only owe its existence to the transcendent Beauty (Lü, October 1922: 2–3). Lü argued that natural piety could only naturalize and expand one's possessive desires, dull one's moral deliberation, and thus abet arrogance (Lü, October 1922: 5–7).

In contrast to nature piety, Lü radically reframed the mind-matter dichotomy in terms of an ontologically primary intersubjective empathy. Lü argued that empathy grew out of both a profound understanding of beings as such and a categorical acknowledgment of all sentient beings' will to live. From this empathy, the social would emerge.

The foundation of a society is empathy.... Therefore, when encountering people, things, and the natural world with an aesthetic attitude, [one] thoroughly understands their

essence without exception. Because of one's acknowledgment and affirmation of their desire for life, empathy arises. And then, social phenomena emerge.

社會之根柢在於同情 . . . 故從美的態度以遇人物自然, 莫不一一洞徹本質, 而自其生之要求, 以為肯定, 得起同情, 而成社會現象 (Lü, January 1922: 2).

In one sentence, Lü redefined social oneness as a never ceasing process of creating intersubjective accords and empathic resonances. This process of approaching a totality readily calls to mind Benjamin's "pure language," a new kind of universality that only emerges "through the process of construction of different parts" (Murthy 2019: 276).

In line with his 1919 call for revolution, Lü argued that aesthetic education must begin from a moral-cum-aesthetic awakening. One could not rely on nature or beautiful objects for this fundamental transformation. Lü posited that, to begin living an aesthetic life, one must embark upon a self-conscious path of purifying the mind. In this sense, Lü considered himself a revolutionary: His theory proposed both a turn away from the naturalized Darwinist calculations of self-interest and a turn toward an aesthetic life by purifying consciousness. Although Lü never explicitly conversed with the Marxist critique of capitalism, his redefinition of social oneness aimed to refute uncritical acceptance of natural piety and to disrupt the logic of selfish calculations embodied in the capitalist expansion of possessive desires.

Taking seriously Lü's idiosyncratic conception of social evolution-cum-revolution gives scholars a valuable opportunity to denaturalize the entrenched cultural memory of the long Chinese revolution. Instead of repeating the triumph of historical materialism, Lü's revolutionary vision opens scholarly horizon to a much broader search for a stronger solidarity and a just global order. Lü's seemingly odd anti-realist ontology-cum-revolution represented a noticeable undercurrent flowing against realist theorizations of the collective future. Lü was merely one of many critics of evolutionism who were nurtured by the influx of Western thought but found inspiration in Buddhist soteriology to re-enchant realism, scientism, and evolutionism with collective spiritual progress (Hammerstrom 2015: 135–137).

The Rise of Moralized Bergsonism and "Scientific" Yogācāra

To understand the rise of a "scientific" Yogācāra and Lü's later reformulation of a Yogācāra evolution-cum-revolution, we first need to understand the rise of Bergsonian creative evolution as a critique of social Darwinism in modern China. As I demonstrate, Lü's unconventional view of science and evolutionism emerged through his debate with Zhang Taiyan on the interpretation of Yogācāra and Bergsonism. This debate was primarily carried out through a series of essays and letters published in different periodicals edited by Li Shicen from late 1920 to early 1921. During this debate, Lü further elaborated on his conviction to re-enchant social relations with Beauty and Truth and to awaken a universal moral agency.

While the increasing sway of Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic education spurred Lü's critique of realism and scientism, the increasing traction of the Bergsonian vogue in May Fourth China intensified Lü's

critique of philosophical solipsism. As persuasively argued by Alex Owen, Bergson's philosophy of intuition shared striking parallels with the *fin-de-siècle* rise of occultism that sought to valorize transcendent self-realization, to advance the experience of the self as inherently spiritual and potentially divine, and to conceive of reality as forever exceeding the reach of the rationalizing mind (Owen 2004: 114–147).

Bergsonian philosophy of life played a crucial role in stimulating a new wave of Chinese vitalism, as seen in the rise of New Confucianism (Chang 2017) and the infatuation with the Yogācāra-inflected phrase “the myriad dharmas are only Consciousness” (Hammerstrom 2010). However, both the Bergsonian philosophy of the occult self and the Chinese vitalist revalorization of self-consciousness suffer from philosophical solipsism (Lin 2018).

In many aspects, the Chinese fascination with the occult self has reflected a widespread dissatisfaction with scientism and social Darwinism. In the 1920s, when many intellectuals started looking for alternatives to social Darwinism, the Bergsonian “philosophy of life” gained sway (Gvili 2015: 39–48). These intellectuals disliked that social Darwinism posits passive subjects who are subordinate to the mechanization of life. Simultaneously, many Buddhist intellectuals also understood social Darwinism as a prescriptive moral system of science rather than a description of natural processes (Hammerstrom 2015: 128–129).

This shared moral concern overdetermined the Chinese reception of Bergson. Bergson rejected natural selection as the driving mechanism of biological and social evolutions. Instead, he theorized an evolution motivated by *élan vital*, a “vital impetus” that is an innate human creative impulse. Although in *fin-de-siècle* Europe, Bergsonian *élan vital* bore a distinct relationship to ancient animal occultism, probably thanks to his fascination with *séance* and other paranormal phenomena (Barnard 2011: 249–256), it satisfied European bourgeois sentimentality precisely because Bergson's concoction of a supra consciousness effectively displaced the analytical power of the intellect as a valid means to access “life as a whole” (Owen 2004:135–138).

However, in their rejection of materialism and scientism, the Chinese admirers of Bergsonism slipped into another trap—philosophical solipsism. They interpreted Bergson's critique of science and rationality through the lens of Confucian sentimentality. For example, Bergsonian intuition was first translated as *zhijue* 直覺 in 1918. *Zhijue* soon became equated with Confucian self-cultivation and transformed into an authentic means to access innate knowledge independent from rationalization (Ciaudo 2016: 44–46). Many Chinese intellectuals found Bergsonism appealing, partially thanks to this moralization process, but most crucially for its passionate promotion of a life force and its critique of scientific materialism and social Darwinism. Bergsonian evolution soon enthralled many Chinese intellectuals, and there were plans to invite Bergson to give lectures in China in December 1921 (Li Shicen 1921: 2).

Lü was dragged into the debate on Yogācāra and the moralized Bergsonism in 1921 (Lü, December 1921; Yao 2014).¹¹ Li Shicen drafted Lü into this debate by requesting Lü to comment on

¹¹ Other cultural luminaries who contributed to this special include Li Shicen, Zhang Dongsun, Cai Yuanpei, Liang Shuming, Li Jinxi, and Feng Youlan.

Zhang Taiyan's comparison of Yogācāra and Bergsonism. Zhang Taiyan attempted to use "science" to "prove" the truth of Yogācāra. For Zhang Taiyan, the resemblance of storehouse consciousness to Bergsonian *vital impetus* and *intuition* provided "scientific" evidence to validate Yogācāra epistemology.

There were two main camps in this debate. Lü Cheng and Liang Shuming (1893–1988), a renowned philosopher, saw an unbridgeable difference between Bergsonism and Yogācāra.¹² Zhang Taiyan and Li Jinxi (1890–1978), another renowned May Fourth intellectual, argued for the equivalence of Bergsonian vital impetus with the Yogācāra doctrine of storehouse consciousness. However, both only read Yogācāra and Bergson in translation and both approached Yogācāra through the lens of Chinese Buddhist hermeneutics.¹³

As early as 1917, Zhang Taiyan had already started a systematic comparison of Bergsonism and Yogācāra (Lai 1993: 49–50). Zhang's first public proposition, which equated the Bergsonian vital impetus with storehouse consciousness, appeared as part of this larger project. This was a January 5, 1921 letter from Zhang to Li Shicen, which Li abridged and titled "Experience and Analysis" (*shiyān yu lixiāng* 實驗與理想) (Yao 2014: 327–328). In this abridged letter, Zhang equated empiricism (*shiyān* 實驗) with the Yogācāra epistemological category *xianliang* (Ch: 現量; Skt: *pratyakṣa*) and likened analysis (*lixiāng* 理想) with *biliang* (Ch: 比量; Skt: *anumāna*, commonly translated as "inference").¹⁴ In Yogācāra epistemology, *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna* are two mutually exclusive modes of knowing, and both have a long-contested history of interpretation (Tillemans 2017). In the eyes of the aspiring Buddhist Lü Cheng, Zhang's crude comparisons committed the fatal sin of creating specious analogies.

Although by contemporary standards, Bergsonism could hardly count as science, in the late 1910s and early 1920s, philosophical methods still occasionally outweighed experiments and the logic of falsifiability (Shino 2009). A relevant anecdote helps us understand the contested perceptions of science at the time. At a 1920 cultural event, the physicist Albert Einstein ran into Bergson. During this short encounter, Bergson harshly criticized Einstein's 1916 publication on General Relativity, accusing Einstein of mixing metaphysics with empirical science. In 1921, when the Nobel Prize committee deliberated on Einstein's award, they decided that, due to Bergson's public critique of

¹² Liang Shuming's position is a more complicated. While he considered Yogācāra and Bergsonism incompatible, he saw the moral potential of Bergsonian *zhijue* in building his version of New Confucianism. Over the years, Liang changed his views of Bergsonism (Ciaudo 2016: 42–43; An 1997; Wu 2005: 63–73).

¹³ Zhang Taiyan is known for having studied many Chinese translations of Yogācāra treatises from the sixth month of 1903 till the seventh month of 1907. A full evaluation of his Yogācāra scholarship is beyond the concerns of the current study. It suffices to point out that Zhang Taiyan's interpretation of Yogācāra is heavily influenced by Chinese Chan, Huayan school, and *Awakening Faith* (Lin 2018: 8–9). As for Li Jinxi 黎錦熙, his dabbling with Yogācāra was even more superficial. Li was a self-trained philologist and an avid advocate for using romanization to replace the Chinese writing system. The essay for the December 1921 issue of *People's Bell* was Li Jinxi's notes of Taixu's lecture on *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* in 1919, combined with his reading of the Chinese translation of Bergson's *Creative Evolution* (Li Jinxi 1921).

¹⁴ Zhang Taiyan interprets *lixiāng* 理想 as *minxiāng zhenli* 冥想真理, literally, "meditating on true principles" (Yao 2014: 328). This is Zhang's unique terminology. The common meaning of *lixiāng* is "ideal" or "aspiration."

Einstein's theory of time, it would be more defensible to recognize Einstein for his relatively less controversial—albeit much less influential—work on the photoelectric effect (Canales 2015; Deleuze 1988: 115–118). Zhang Taiyan was not alone in perceiving Bergsonism as scientific.

Initially, this debate was a private one. Lü Cheng critiqued Zhang Taiyan through epistles mediated by Li Shicen. Li soon published these letters in January 1921 in *The Lamp for Learning* (*Xuedeng* 學燈). Once dragged into the public arena, Lü Cheng was compelled to participate further. Li organized a special issue on Bergson in December 1921 in the *People's Bell*, where Lü published his one and only essay on the topic of Bergsonism and Yogācāra (Lü, December 1922), and continued to publish Lü Cheng's and Zhang Taiyan's letters until January 1922.

Moral Agency Lies Neither Inside nor Outside

Despite the *prima facie* focus on Yogācāra doctrine of storehouse consciousness and Bergsonian vital impetus, the deeper motivation for Lü's participation lies elsewhere. A close analysis of the letters reveals that Lü's first goal was to establish a rigorous comparative method as the foundation for awakening commoners' aesthetic sensibility. His second goal was to put forth a different social theory to explain collective progress, one that is grounded in Yogācāra causal theory and one that posits a universal moral agency as the sole mover of social evolution.¹⁵

Moral agency, for Lü, lies in the intersubjective, i.e., the agentive seeds in storehouse consciousness, neither in the impersonal objective world nor in some mythical interior psyche. By articulating his criticism of both Zhang Taiyan and Bergson, Lü Cheng sharpened his theorization of an agentless moral agency. Lü was convinced that, to guarantee the right direction toward collective emancipation, one must take seriously one's own limitedness and rely on comprehensive comparisons to expand one's intellect. Only then can one harness the power of the universal moral agency as the driving force of a collective march toward an aesthetic society. To miss the soteriological function of Lü's philosophical investigation would be to impose present disciplinary categorizations back into early twentieth century China when the boundaries between philosophy, Buddhology, and soteriology were still contested.

Lü clearly stated his motive in his reply to Li Shicen: to avoid mixing seemingly similar ideas that could precipitate further confusion, especially when the truth is still beyond reach: "The theorists shall not use seemingly alike concepts to precipitate further confusion" (*gu lishuo zhe buke gengyi yixi fangfu zhi tan, zhuanxiang hunhuo* 故立說者不可更以依稀彷彿之談，轉相混惑) (Yao 2014: 331). At first glance, Lü seemed to be obsessed with the accurate interpretation of ancient doctrines. However, careful readers could readily recognize Lü Cheng's consistent attentiveness to analytical methods in both his call for aesthetic revolution and his quest for true messages of the Buddha. In an age overwhelmed by imported Western thought, Lü Cheng relied on rigorous methods as the vessel to keep one afloat during the tempest of proliferating false analogies. In this debate, one finds an

¹⁵ Yogācāra causal enframing (*Weishi yuanqi* 唯識緣起) is also called *Laiye yuanqi* 賴耶緣起. This term stems from a later Huayan school characterization of Xuanzang and Kuiji's main teachings. See *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism* (<http://www.buddhism-dict.net/ddb>), entry "賴耶緣起" for details and further references. Both Lü and his teacher Ouyang Jingwu used these labels to characterize their own doctrinal positions.

essential characteristic of Lü's scholarship that shaped his lifelong comparative studies: his careful provision of textual evidence in its original language.

One must read the endnotes of these letters to appreciate Lü Cheng's insistence on accessing writings in their original languages. In the special issue on Bergson, where Lü published his refutation of Zhang Taiyan, other than Bergson's Chinese translator, Zhang Dongsun, and Bergson's biographer, Yan Jicheng, Lü Cheng was the only one who cared enough to read the French original.¹⁶ Lü's introduction to Bergsonism was brief but to the point (Ciaudo 2016: 43). Likewise, in articulating Yogācāra doctrines, Lü Cheng was careful to list all textual sources to substantiate his claims. Lü's care is in stark contrast to Zhang Taiyan, who rarely referenced the primary texts to support his interpretations. One of Lü Cheng's main critiques of Zhang is that most of Zhang's interpretations contradicted canonical Yogācāra sūtras and treatises penned by Xuanzang (602–664) and Xuanzang's disciple Kuiji (632–682).¹⁷ Lü protested that Zhang's invention of specious analogies, due to its lack of scholarly due diligence, should not be valued by scholars (Yao 2014: 330–331).

This debate also reveals the seeds of a Yogācāra evolutionism. Lü Cheng was keenly aware of the pitfall in joining this debate: Randomly comparing two thought systems out of context could hardly bear scholarly fruits. Nevertheless, to dispel the proliferation of false equivalences, Lü Cheng chose to engage. Out of numerous possible reasons that one can enlist to dispel random associations, Lü Cheng focused on three. As I show below, these three points provide valuable information on why Yogācāra became newly relevant for Lü and like-minded Buddhist revolutionaries.

First, Lü reframed the perceivable world in terms of Yogācāra causal theory. He extensively illustrated three irreconcilable contradictions between Bergsonian etiology and Yogācāra dependent-origination. Anti-realism lay at the center of Lü's soteriological project. Lü Cheng argued that “the very reason that Mahāyāna Buddhism sets up the concept of storehouse consciousness was to dispel the mistaken belief in a really-existing objective world and to establish the truth of consciousness-only” (*kuang dacheng zhi li zangshi suoyi zheli shijing wancheng weishi zhiyi* 況大乘之立藏識所以遮離實境完成唯識之義) (Lü, December 1921: 4). Experts of Yogācāra philosophy will immediately recognize the soteriological ramifications here. For Lü, establishing consciousness-only (*weishi* 唯識) entails the simultaneous destruction of two mistaken views that deem either external objects (attachment to dharma) or internal sensory organs (attachment to the self) as really existing (*shijing* 實境). Thus, it becomes evident that Lü Cheng did not reject Bergsonism *per se*; he only denied the analytic efficacy of Bergsonian etiology and rejected the validity of Zhang's method, which used

¹⁶ All other essayists or translators in this issue relied on German, English, Japanese, and Chinese translations of Bergson. This includes Cai Yuanpei, who, despite his proficiency in French, only chose to translate selected passages from a German translation (Ciaudo 2013: 306 footnote 34).

¹⁷ In this letter, Lü Cheng not only substantiated his own interpretation with canonical texts but also pointed out where Zhang's misreading of Yogācāra could have come from, namely, the controversial text *Awakening Mahāyāna Faith*, adumbrating the controversy of *Awakening Faith* between the China Inner Learning Institute and Taixu's disciples in late 1922—a debate that lasted well into the 1930s. At this time, Lü Cheng only used Chinese translations and treatises composed by Chinese authors. He was still learning Sanskrit and classical Tibetan on his own at this time and only became proficient in both classical languages around 1925.

Bergsonian “science” to “prove” the truth of consciousness-only (Yao 2014: 328). In Lü’s mind, neither Bergsonism nor Zhang Taiyan’s Yogācāra could lead China out of its modern crisis.

Indeed, Lü stressed that Yogācāra causal enframing, which explains all processes in the entire perceptual world in terms of seeds and their causal efficacy, was the most accurate description of how things evolve:

The cause is the potential in storehouse consciousness that could cause a dharma to rise. This [potential in storehouse consciousness] is called seed. Conditions are all other already arisen dharmas. Only seed could cause its own fruit.

因即藏識中能生其法之功能。所謂種子。緣即諸餘已現起法。種子但能各生自果 (Lü, December 1921: 1).

Throughout history, many Yogācāra masters posited that moral agency lies in the karmic seeds stored in *ālayavijñāna*, neither in an interiority of the self nor in any objective world outside consciousness. In the Yogācāra theory, there are eight kinds of consciousness. The first five could be intuitively equated with the consciousnesses associated with the five senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching). The sixth consciousness handles a wide range of psychological functions, including but not limited to perception, emotion, intention, and, most importantly, deliberation and discernment. But the seventh and eighth consciousnesses are the unique inventions of Yogācāra masters. The eighth consciousness, often called storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), is the storehouse of all karmic seeds. In contrast, the seventh consciousness manufactures the illusion of a subject-object divide in the mental processes.

For Lü, the path of collective liberation relied on the learner’s conscious discernment (which relies on the functions of the sixth consciousness) of false analogies and on the ascertainment of correct interpretation. In contrast, Zhang prescribed a soteriological path that followed the Chinese Chan tradition, whose fundamental teaching is that liberation is a matter of taming and stopping the functioning of the sixth consciousness (*fuduan yishi ze zangshi zixian* 伏斷意識則藏識自現) (Yao 2014: 327, 328, 330). Lü not only harshly criticized Zhang’s soteriology as a misreading stemmed from the abiding Chinese Chan misconception (*miushuo* 謬說) but further insisted that “this [sixth consciousness] is the only place where learners could put forth their effort [to realize the truth of consciousness-only]” (*xuezhe zhuoli zheng weici shi lai* 學者著力正惟此是賴) (Yao 2014: 328).

In other words, while Lü prioritized conscious discernment of the human mind as the path out of the Darwinist jungle, Zhang followed Bergsonian dismissal of the reasoning intellect and saw the sixth consciousness as antithetical to liberation. Besides, Zhang’s position contradicts the Yogācāra theory of how all eight consciousnesses relate. In Yogācāra theory, the sixth consciousness is always present,¹⁸ and liberation is a matter of purifying the self-grasping and object-grasping aspects in

¹⁸ Verse 16 of *Thirty Verses* says “manovijñānasamḥūtiḥ sarvadāsaṃjñikād ṛte/ samāpattidvayān middhān mūrchanād apy acittakāt” (manovijñāna—the sixth consciousness—functions at all times, except for those who are in the state of no-thought, during the two kinds of concentrations, i.e., non-conceptual and total cessation, as well as deep sleep and fainting). Xuanzang translates this verse as “意識常現起/除生無想天/及無心二定/睡眠與悶絕。” This verse points out that, other than for a few exceptions of deep concentration and rare cases when people lose

mental activities. When Zhang suggested that Bergson must have directly experienced Yogācāra storehouse consciousness, Lü Cheng considered his statement pure speculation (Yao 2014: 328). In Lü's eye, both Zhang's and Bergson's causal story is a *prima facie* etiological intuition without conscious discernment. This jettison of reason and analysis, in Lü's eyes, could only intensify one's egotistic grasping and lead one further into the solipsist trap.

Lü's second refutation concerned the ontology of nature, which is tied to the question raised in Lü's debate with Cai Yuanpei on whether nature has any liberating potential. While Bergson infused moral agency into both plants and animals, Lü considered plants and nature in general as mere manifestations of consciousness. Bergson tried to bridge the mind and matter dualism by asserting that all matters are streams of vibrations. Under this rubric, what distinguishes animals and plants is mobility: Plants could survive without moving (photosynthesis), but animals must chase streams of vibrations as food. Despite the apparent similarities between streams of vibrations and streams of momentarily arising and disappearing consciousness, they tell entirely different causal stories. Bergson reduced every evolutionary trajectory of plants and animals into one common origin, a thinly veiled theological concept, and put plants and animals on equal footing. Lü was convinced that Bergson had wrongly identified plants as agentive (Lü, December 1921: 3). In the Yogācāra system, nature arises dependently from the world of sentient beings. Therefore, for Lü, plants are mere appearances in the five consciousnesses engendered by shared agentive seeds in storehouse consciousness. This rebuttal discloses to us that Lü Cheng faulted Bergson for having mistakenly ascribed transformative agency to insentient beings, thus undermining the sole source of moral agency, a.k.a., the agentive seeds stored in the intersubjective consciousness.

Thirdly, Lü took issue with Bergsonian memory, which Lü judged to be lacking analytic efficacy and thereby void of liberating potential. Scholars of Buddhist philosophy would immediately recognize memory as a central concern of Yogācāra thinkers. Because Abhidharma Buddhists consider consciousness as momentarily arising and disappearing, and assume annihilation as self-evident, explaining the apparent continuity of memory becomes a thorny issue for defenders of non-self. Indian idealists argued that a continuous memory proves the existence of a real self. To defend the doctrine of non-self, Yogācāra masters invented the storehouse consciousness as a stream of momentary karmic impressions, i.e., "seeds," to explain the perception of a continual memory without an enduring self. In contrast, Bergson took for granted that memory was the very reservoir of durations in life, extending life from past to future (Lawlor and Leonard 2016). For Lü Cheng, this naïve assumption of duration not only lacks explanatory power but is too crude to have any analytic efficacy. Lü likened it to the Chan doctrine of one thought (*yixin* 一心), which contains many arisings and disappearances of karmic seeds. Lü believed that to hold onto this composite illusion was to miss the opportunity of actual realization.

To sum up, Lü rejected Bergsonism because he saw Bergson's life force as another failed attempt to escape the Darwinist jungle. In contrast with Bergson's Chinese promoters who moralized

consciousness (similar to drug induced general anesthesia), the sixth consciousness always arises and functions. This is in direct contradiction to Zhang's understanding of Yogācāra theory of consciousness.

Bergsonian intuition, Lü rejected Bergsonism because it could not lead to collective liberation. Either way, Bergsonism was not received on its own merits but rather served as a springboard for Chinese intellectuals to launch their own renewals.

The Birth of a Spiritual Evolutionism

This debate revealed a crucial step in Lü's transition from aesthetics to Yogācāra: It was the first time that Lü linked the evolution of life with Yogācāra causal theory. This debate also paved the way for Lü's later reframing of social evolution-cum-revolution with Yogācāra soteriology. It was also the first time that Lü experimented with comparative hermeneutics to clarify his point and convince others. Although Lü failed to garner broader support, his careful arguments in this debate established Lü's authority as a Yogācāra scholar (An 1997: 337–362; Wu 2005: 63–73). This debate discloses that, like many Buddhist intellectuals at the time, Lü was convinced that Buddhist scholarship was the best vehicle for achieving collective emancipation.

Thus, this public debate on seemingly obscure Yogācāra doctrines marked a watershed moment: the rise of Yogācāra as a social evolutionary theory. Lü and Zhang's debate played a key role in introducing Yogācāra as an alternative evolutionary theory to the May Fourth thinkers thanks to the broader readership of the *People's Bell* and the journal's sustained effort to introduce various evolutionary theories to Chinese readers.

When contextualized within the intellectual horizon of the *People's Bell*, Lü's Yogācāra provided a powerful alternative to both Western evolutionary theories and Bergsonian vitalism. Lü saw Yogācāra causal enframing as the only antidote to the two extremes that were the roots of all modern depravities: realism, as embodied in science and social Darwinism; and philosophical solipsism, as embodied in Bergsonian creative evolution. Once Lü Cheng, Zhang Taiyuan, and Li Shicen introduced Yogācāra alongside the global flow of evolutionary theories, the ancient doctrines of Yogācāra also adopted a new afterlife. While a detailed analysis of Lü's reinvention of Yogācāra soteriology as a social evolutionary-cum-revolutionary theory in the 1930s and 1940s warrants an independent book-length project, the current study has mapped out one of the central forces that led to the rise of Yogācāra evolutionism in the May Fourth era.

My study restores the social contexts of the surprising rise of Yogācāra in the May Fourth era of realism. As has been demonstrated, what propelled Lü toward Yogācāra studies was a combination of evolutionary thinking with a yearning for a new sociality free from excessive materialism and rampant individualism. What justifies social cohesion, in Lü's rubric, is aesthetic empathy and Buddhism-inflected causal theory. Instead of locating sociality in objective truth, Lü reconceived social phenomena as intersubjective accord, which he would later reinterpret with Yogācāra causal enframing. This response is Lü's rejoinder to the lively discussions about the spiritual and the material among both secular and Buddhist intellectuals (Moore 1967: 125–131; Hammerstrom 2015: 128–149).

The teleological discourse of the victory of historical materialism has masked a central debate on social ontology in modern China, i.e., whether society in its totality should be understood in realist or idealist terms. To Buddhist intellectuals, this new dualistic view of “social reality” must have

sounded like an echo of the two extremes of realism and nihilism, only now centered on the ontological status of social facts. Lü Cheng's refutation of these two extremes demonstrates his stance as a non-theistic non-realist. Although Lü had yet to flesh out his full rebuttal in Yogācāra terms, he directly addressed these issues in his critiques of Cai Yuanpei, Zhang Taiyan, and Bergson. More than academic curiosity, these discussions reflected contentious issues: the possibility of collective redemption was at stake.

Moreover, my study of Lü's Buddhism-inflected social ontology also serves as a corrective to Anglophone presentations of Buddhist philosophy, which tend to look for comparable Buddhist inquiries that resonate with the concerns of contemporary Anglophone philosophy, including, but not limited to, the free will of the individual, the nature of perception and knowledge, and the question of essence (Tuck 1990). As I have demonstrated, Buddhist social ontology marked one of the central appeals of Buddhism in modern China. Many intellectuals hoped to reorient Buddhist soteriology for building a society outside Darwinist competition and scientific materialism.

Chinese Buddhism has always been integral to communal life. To confine it in the private sphere is to refuse to recognize the ever-present demand for transcendence in building an equitable society, for which faith-based communities have always provided vital inspirations and crucial justifications. Lü's social theory in the early 1920s not only fundamentally reframed the philosophical basis of collective future in terms of intersubjectivity and soteriology but also heralded a social turn of Buddhist soteriology that belied the discourse of secularization and called into question the myth of disenchantment.

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