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Individuality beyond the Dichotomy of “Small Self and Big Self” in Contemporary Chinese Education: Lessons from Hu Shi and Liang Shuming

Abstract This article identifies the problem that an instrumentalist mode of thinking dominates China’s contemporary education practice and suggests that the dichotomy between the “small self and big self,” a notion that has been present throughout modern Chinese history, exacerbates this instrumentalism. It parallels the loss of China’s tradition of self-cultivation in the modern education system. This paper proposes that cultivating the inner self by releasing talent unique to each individual as well as energy for creatively making meaningful connections with others may represent a new means of moving past the dichotomy of the “small self and big self.” The paper examines this issue through a comparative analysis of Hu Shi and Liang Shuming’s thoughts on individuality.

Keywords individuality, inner self, Liang Shuming

Initial Discussion: Why Does the Dichotomy between the “Small Self and Big Self” Matter?

A distinctive phenomenon in China’s contemporary education is the persistence of an examination-dominated education system in which teachers, students, parents and all stakeholders in education focus on students’ examination scores. They regard these scores as enabling upward mobility toward a bright future—say—a key secondary school, an elite university in China or abroad, or an enviably highly paid job. This characteristic of Chinese education is constantly criticized by the public as well as by the state because the youth are educated not to develop comprehensive qualities but simply to acquire academic skills, and because students are not encouraged to develop creativity and individuality. In response to these criticisms, various policies and reforms have

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been implemented. The so-called *suzhi jiaoyu* 素质教育 (quality education) reform, the new curriculum reform, and *guopei jihua* 国培计划 (the nationwide teacher training plan) are all designed to meet the objectives of cultivating students’ creativity and comprehensive qualities. For example, a very recent related resolution, issued by the Beijing Municipal Commission of Education on March 19, 2013, is called the *Notice to Alleviate the Burden of Students’ Homework in Basic Education*. This policy states that primary students in Grade 1 and Grade 2 should have no homework at all and that time spent on homework should not exceed 30 minutes in Grade 3 and Grade 4. Only one examination is allowed per semester for primary schools. However, the feasibility of this policy is highly doubted by teachers, parents and the general public. This is the common skeptical reaction of the public to the various policies to limit cramming for examinations. It appears that ongoing educational reform is stuck.

In the author’s view, it is necessary to engage in a historical examination to gain a deeper understanding of this problem. By examining the educational systems used during different periods of modern China over the twentieth century, it is intriguing to discover that the tradition of self-cultivation embedded in Confucian education as well as in such Chinese schools of thoughts as Daoism and Buddhism was lost in the process of China’s modern transition in education (Ho, 1995; Tu, 1999). Instead, an exam-oriented curriculum has dominated educational practices. Schooling is largely a process to prepare students for exams and then for upward mobility. Self-cultivation has been excluded from the process of education, as education has become an external tool for testing authorized knowledge rather than for realizing other purposes. Although the content of “other purposes” has changed over time, this instrumentalist thinking mode has been reinforced.

The author suggests that the absence of self-cultivation in the process of China’s modernization is related to the instrumentalist mode of thinking embedded in current educational practices. A brief examination of China’s modern history reveals that either the society dominates the self (for example, in Mao’s time) or the self turns exclusive and hostile to others (for example, in today’s highly competitive marketized society). It appears that a balanced understanding of the self is always lacking. This failure to find a balance has paralleled the negligence of self-cultivation in China’s modern education system.

As explored this puzzle in the history of China’s modern transition, the author found that a dichotomy between *xiaowo dawo* 小我大我 (the small self and big self) that has existed in each distinctive period of China’s modern history may

relate to the negligence of self-cultivation and thus education's failure to meet the function of subjectification in China's modern transformation as defined by educational theorist Gert Biesta (2012) on three functions of education for socialization, qualification and subjectification. This failure to achieve subjectification has in turn led to an instrumentalist approach that has prevailed in educational theories and practice. Therefore, it is the purpose of this study to explore a new concept of individuality that may move beyond the dichotomy between the "small self and big self." The author suggests that learning to cultivate the self as the practice of subjectification may help the individual to construct a unique mind of their own and thus counter the mechanical instrumentalist mode of thinking.

A Brief Introduction to the Changing Meanings of "Small Self and Big Self" in Modern China

The idea of the relationship between the self and society is a persistent topic in Chinese philosophy (Lee, 1994). An ideal person in Confucianism is the one who realizes *xiushen* 修身 (self-cultivation) and is thus able to *qijia* 齐家 (regulate the family), *zhiguo* 治国 (govern the state) and *ping tianxia* 平天下 (set the world at peace). In this process, self-cultivation is the primary and fundamental starting point of the Confucian ideal of self-perfection (Horne, 2010). As Tu Wei-Ming (1985) has suggested, the self in Confucianism is an open and ongoing entity. Unlike the closed and unchanged system of *si* 私 (the ego), the self has the potential for endless transformation and indeed perfection. It may embrace the family, the state, nature and even the cosmos as part of this self. Tu's explanation of self suggests the possibility of individual growth by breaking the closed system of ego and embracing an open system that hosts an ongoing process of self-cultivation for a broader vision of self.

Unfortunately, the significance of self-cultivation has not been valued but criticized, misinterpreted and seriously undermined in the history of China's modernization. When Confucianism became a target for critics of China's backwardness, a dichotomy between the "small self and big self" replaced the rich tradition of self-cultivation of Confucianism and dominated the public discourse. In contrast to the ongoing process of self-cultivation described above, the dichotomy between the "small self and big self" separates the individual and society by labeling the small self as the individual and the big self as the nation or society. In this dichotomy, the small self, the "I", is considered a closed system

of ego and thus, unsatisfactory and requiring change to benefit the nation or society, that is, the big self. The small self and the big self thus become two separate domains, and the individual loses the possibility of self-transformation toward a broader vision of self. The individual as a small self is the subject of change for the benefit of society, the big self. A boundary is firmly established between the small self and the big self, between individual and society. In this dichotomy, the self becomes a closed and exclusive entity, and society easily dominates the individual. The potential for the individual to cultivate the self and to foster a broader vision of the self is thus suppressed.

In China’s modern history, Liang Qichao 梁启超 is the intellectual who first proposed the dichotomy between the “small self and big self” (Xu, 2009). In his article, *The Origin of China’s Backwardness*, written in 1890, Liang wrote: “There is a difference between the small self and the big self. The so-called ‘big self’ is the self in groups; the so-called ‘small self’ is the self in the individual body.” Liang interpreted the concept of the “small self and big self” in the framework of the relationship of the individual and the state in the context of the national crisis at the turn of the twentieth century. Drawing on the theory of evolution, Liang contrasted the mortality of the small self with the immortality of the big self. Therefore, the big self, represented as the state or society, was favored, and the small self was equated with the ego and became the target to be changed for the sake of the good of society or the state.

Liang Qichao’s concept of the dichotomy of “small self and big self” was advocated and became popular in the discourse of the May Fourth liberal intellectuals, especially Hu Shi. During the years before and after the May Fourth Movement (1915–1922),¹ when the traditional culture of Confucianism was blamed for causing the country’s backwardness and weakness, the value of self-cultivation was rejected. During this period, the small self was not fully rejected; in fact, its development was advocated. However, the development of the individual was to be directed toward serving the good of society and the prosperity of the nation. The small self was abandoned and thus ignored in the dichotomy. Although this idea of the “small self being educated for the betterment of the big self” was questioned by some intellectuals, such as Liang Shuming, it was well accepted and had a strong impact on the minds of young

¹ In this article, the May Fourth Movement is distinguished from the May Fourth Incident, which occurred on May 4, 1919. The May Fourth Movement refers to the period from 1915 to 1922. Zhou Cezong has a detailed description on the distinguishing features of this time period. C. Z. Zhou (1960), *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

people.

It was thus unsurprising that the dichotomy between the “small self and big self” continued, though in a different form, during the time of Mao Zedong’s rule (1949–1976). After all, Mao Zedong had also been an enthusiastic participant in the May Fourth Movement and a promising young intellectual who was passionately seeking a way to enable China’s national survival. The difference between Mao’s idea of self and that of the May Fourth intellectuals was that according to him, the small self was to be completely ignored and to be sacrificed for the big self. This prioritization is clearly reflected in the motto of *wei renmin fuwu* 为人民服务 (serving people as the main responsibility of the individual).

The ideology of sacrificing the self to the state became dysfunctional toward the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and a new ideology of the self was sought by young people, whose minds needed to be guided. This search for a new concept of self was reflected in the nationwide discussion incited by a letter called “Pan Xiao’s Letter” published in the journal *China Youth* (May 11, 1980). The young girl Pan Xiao asked the question “why am I unable to find a way forward for my life?” which resonated strongly in hundreds of thousands of her peers among China’s youth.² A personal crisis was dominating the minds of young persons, who sought a new relationship between the self and society that was different from Mao’s ideology of “sacrificing the self and serving the people.” Unfortunately, the “Pan Xiao Discussion” (1980) did not succeed in moving beyond the dichotomy between the “small self and big self” (He, 2010). The discussion ended with the conclusion that “I need to do what is subjectively good for myself and objectively good for others as well.” It appeared that Pan Xiao solved her inner crisis by combining a focus on the good of the self with a focus on the good of others. However, this conclusion was too vague to help individuals build a dynamic and constructive relationship between the self and others. Pan Xiao did not find a way forward for her life, instead simply blurring the relationship between the self and others.

As He Zhaotian (2010) insightfully noted, the conclusion from the “Pan Xiao Discussion” reflected a continued dichotomy between “small self and big self.” The legitimacy of the existence of the small self (the self for one’s own sake) had to rely on the big self or concern for the good of others. In this case, “others” vaguely referred to society. He further argued that this continuous acceptance of the dichotomy between the “small self and big self” later led to the spread of an

² The name Pan Xiao is a pseudonym combining two real names: Wang Xiaojun and Pan Yi.

exclusive and competitive self in the marketization of society from the 1990s up to the present day. Without an independent self as a dynamic and active agent, the individual is easily molded by the logic of marketization, the exclusive logic of competition and self-interest. In other words, the individual does not have the power to develop his or her own mind and instead is only able to follow social trends. Therefore, the mind of the individual has been either selfless in Mao’s time or selfish in today’s marketized society. Without one’s own vision of life, it is not surprising that the instrumentalist mode of thinking focusing on the external purposes of life is dominant in education and in social life at large. This phenomenon suggests that the true mission of current educational reform is to cultivate an individuality that is able to move beyond the dichotomy between the “small self and big self.”

Now that the question of how to cultivate a sense of individuality beyond the dichotomy between the “small self and big self” has been advanced, the author will go on to elaborate a comparative study of Hu Shi and Liang Shuming’s views of individuality and review their respective conceptions. Based on this comparative study, a new concept of individuality emphasizing the possibility of cultivating individuality as a never-ending process of self-transformation through inner experience will be proposed. This point of view urges the revival of the tradition of self-cultivation through and in education.

A Comparative Study of Hu Shi and Liang Shuming on Individuality

The comparison of the concepts of individuality outlined by Hu Shi 胡适 and Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 was not pursued by accident. Hu Shi (1891–1962), a disciple of John Dewey at Columbia University, returned to China in 1917 after finishing his PhD in philosophy, took a teaching position at Peking University and became an enthusiastic contributor and later chief editor of the journal *Xin Qingnian* 新青年 (New Youth). Supported by this journal, a most influential journal among young people during that period, Hu Shi soon gained fame and influence among the youth and became a leading figure in the May Fourth Movement. His view on individuality strongly promoted the popular acceptance of the dichotomy between the “small self and big self.” His views largely established the model for the ideal modern Chinese citizen: the small self is important but not ideal and should be targeted for transformation into the big self.

On the other hand, Liang Shuming (1893–1988) was considered a

conservative who continued to be intoxicated by the old culture, which had long been regarded as dead and decayed in the eyes of the radical liberals and the progressive youth of the time. In fact, however, Liang's view on individuality was embedded in his thinking on China's modern transformation and reflected a different understanding of being a modern person in China. Although he considered himself a lifelong Buddhist, Liang was also called "the last Confucian" by his American biographer Guy Alitto (1986). Liang's academic contribution has essentially been his re-interpretation of Confucian thought in the context of modern China. In particular, his concept of *lixing* 理性 (ethical rationality) is a creative re-interpretation of Confucianism that provides a critical resource for developing a new individuality able to transcend the dichotomy between the "small self and big self."³

The intention of this comparative study of Hu Shi and Liang Shuming is not to praise the one and dismiss the other, nor is it a critique of Hu or Liang's thought per se. There is no doubt that both Hu Shi and Liang Shuming are significant figures in China's modern history. The comparison of Hu and Liang focuses solely on their views of individuality and not on their overall philosophical ideas. The purpose of the comparison is to understand the dichotomy between the "small self and big self," its limitations and the means of overcoming it and developing a new vision of individuality. The development of this new concept of individuality is intended to contribute to a revival of the tradition of self-cultivation through and in education.

Hu Shi's View on Individuality: The Small Self for the Big Self

Hu Shi's Description of the "Small Self and Big Self"

In Hu Shi's view, the small self is not necessarily "bad." Instead, it is desirable and the foundation of a big self. In the article *On Ipsenism* Hu considered the ideal concept of the small self as an "Ipsen egoism." He quoted Ipsen: "*If you want to do good for the society, the best way to do so is to construct yourself into a well-functioning machine first...* if you encounter a shipwreck, you should save yourself first" (original emphasis; Hu, 2006, p. 5). This passage clearly reveals Hu's concept of individuality. He suggested that the full development of

³ H.-Y. Ip translated *lixing* as ethical rationality. H.-Y Ip (1991), Liang Shuming and the Idea of Democracy in Modern China. *Modern China*, 17(4), 469–508. doi: 10.1177/009770049101700402

individual potential is the primary condition of a well-functioning society. However, his affirmation of individual development was impeded by the immediate purpose of serving the social good. Thus, the inner value of individual development was ignored in Hu’s concept of individuality. He remained silent on how the individual addresses the conflicting interests of the individual and society. In addition, he made the over-hasty conclusion that every well-functioning individual would automatically contribute to a progressive and advanced society.

Hu Shi further described his notion of the “big self” in the article *On Immortality*. He clearly claimed that the small self is mortal but the big self—society—is immortal: “All kinds of small selves in the past, present and future combine together into a big self. The small self will die but the big self is immortal... the immortality of the big self determines that *the small self has to be responsible for the big self*” (emphasis added; Hu, 2006, p. 34). In this passage, Hu Shi confirms his earlier view that the small self should serve the good of the big self. This direction of individual development toward the social good is a personal responsibility. This responsibility legitimizes the existence of the small self. However, we also clearly observe that the individuality referred to by Hu Shi did not concern the inner experience of the individual but rather emphasized the responsibility of the individual to society. The inner landscape of the individual mind was ignored as the mind was directed toward an external purpose: the social good.

Hu Shi may not have realized that his view on the relationship between the individual and society would not necessarily lead to the blossoming of social development. In his later treatise, he adjusted the tone of the relationship between the individual and society and further favored social development as the priority. In the article, *On New Life of Non-Individualism*, Hu wrote: “I do not agree with the view that to improve the society we need to improve the individual self first... Instead, we need to improve the system, habits, thoughts and education... By improving society, we improve the individual as a consequence” (Hu, 2006, p. 244). Being fearful that the emphasis on individual development would lead to a selfish society, Hu departed from his earlier individualist position and emphasized the necessity of social progress as the foundation of individual development.

Problems with Hu’s Conception of Individuality

From the perspective of the relationship between the small self and the big self

that Hu Shi discussed in his work, it seems that Hu Shi did not hold a consistent view of individuality. He highlighted the significance of an independent self to distinguish himself from the traditional view of the self embedded in various relationships. However, his Ipsenist self was, to some extent, a mechanical one. He suggested that critical questioning using the scientific method was a means of constructing this independent/small self (Hu, 2006, p. 5). He claimed that his thoughts were mostly influenced by Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895) and John Dewey (1859–1952). Huxley's motto, "Give me evidence!" was very well received in the minds of the liberal leaders of the May Fourth Movement, and Dewey, Hu's adored teacher, had proposed the use of the scientific method for the development of intelligence as an approach to construct a democratic community. In this history, we observe that Hu's advocacy of the small self concerned the development of reasoning through the scientific method. He ignored the necessity of cultivating the inner resources of the self. However, although Hu claimed to be a faithful disciple of Dewey and it appeared that Hu's concept of the self echoed Dewey's elaboration of self and society in his philosophy of experience (Dewey, 1916/1944), Hu's understanding of the self lacked a sense of the inner resources that Dewey valued in terms of religious attitudes or aesthetic experience (Dewey, 1929/1960; Dewey, 1934/2005). Without paying attention to this aspect of self, Hu failed to develop any insight into the inner landscape of the individual and thus constructed a boundary between the small self and the big self without the resources to bridge the two while calling only for social responsibility. However, where does this social responsibility come from? Can we have social responsibility by following the noble calls of some leaders?

Given this absence of concern for the inner resources of the self, it is not surprising to find an inconsistency in Hu's views on the relationship between the individual and society. He could not construct a continuous connection between the small self and the big self. Due to this lack of a connection, either the small self would withdraw from society, an approach that Hu despised, or the small self would be regarded only as a subject responsible to serve the good of society, an approach that Hu embraced. Hu Shi believed that the scientific method could play the role of connecting the small self to the big self, guiding the individual to become a responsible citizen serving the social good. Tan (2004) noted that Hu exaggerated the importance of the scientific method in his interpretation of Dewey's thought. Moreover, his application of the scientific method did not embrace the faith in the individual's inner strength, which was a part of Dewey's philosophy (Dewey, 1934/1991).

The historian Yu Yingshi (1995) commented that a trend of May Fourth intellectual leaders was to combine politics with the life of the individual. That is, the understanding of individuality was highly motivated by the political purpose of educating new people who could make a contribution to strengthening the nation-state. This comment may also apply to Hu's changing attitudes on the relationship between the individual and society demonstrated in the earlier paragraphs. These attitudes were in turn closely related to the changing political atmosphere in that time period. In such a heavily political context, the small self was sadly submerged in the public discourse for the social good. Yu (1995) lamented that the tradition of cultivating the inner strength of the self through daily experience, a tradition that had thrived since the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) periods, was suspended in the radical discourse around promoting science and democracy during the May Fourth Movement. Meanwhile, the religious resources inherited in the Western discourse of science and democracy was almost completely ignored by such Chinese adherents as Hu Shi.

In summary, the author suggests that Hu's negligence of the need to nurture the inner resources of the individual led to his inconsistent arguments regarding the relationship between the small self and the big self. He attempted to address this inconsistency by contrasting the two concepts and favoring the latter one. He then proposed an anti-individualist approach that took the position that social progress could aid individual development. His deliberate abandonment of the Chinese tradition of cultivating the inner self through reflection on daily experience resulted in the lack of any connection between the self and society and thereby the loss of a vision of self-transformation toward a broader self. The cutting of the bonds between the self and society resulted in the individual being directed to focus solely on the external purposes of life. For the May Fourth Movement, this instrumentalist mode of thinking dominated the mentality of intellectuals. When the individual focuses only on external purposes, the self is easily lost.

Hu's Personal Struggle

Hu lived through a dramatically changing society. The rich tradition of Confucianism in which the May Fourth generation of intellectuals rooted themselves was discarded during the May Fourth Movement. A sense of alienation became the profound common experience shared by a growing number of intellectuals, as Chou Min-Chih (1984, p. 220), the biographer of Hu Shi, observed. By enthusiastically proposing a new culture to promote the prosperity

of the new nation, Hu never ceased to express his deep concern about the social, political and intellectual issues of the time. However, as Chou noted, it was a brutal fact that Hu “derived little personal satisfaction from what was then Chinese society. He became an existential individualist, seeking the meaning of life all on his own” (p. ix). In his later life, Hu devoted himself to editing and re-interpreting the Chinese classics. Ironically, as a leading intellectual who radically rejected the value of Chinese traditions embodied in the classics, Hu found a few moments of joy in the Chinese classics as an escape from China’s harsh reality (p. 189).

The contrast between Hu Shi’s efforts to promote Westernized culture and his devotion to the Chinese classics reflected his own struggle over the conception of individuality—how to develop a consistent relationship between society and the self in a radically changing social context. Though his public call was to merge the small self into the immortal big self or the society, his personal choice was just the opposite—the solitude of a private escape. According to Chou (1984), Hu became “an existential individualist, seeking the meaning of life all on his own” (p. ix). He became the type of person he himself publicly opposed.

Hu’s personal struggle suggests that the dichotomy between the “small self and big self” could not guide the individual to navigate the intricate connections between the self and society. The negligence of the value of the inner resources of the self directs the individual to the external purposes of life and leaves the individual with no choice except for an instrumentalist mode of thinking for daily life.

Liang Shuming’s View on Individuality: Inner Self with *Lixing*

As a contemporary of Hu Shi, Liang Shuming faced the same social conditions as Hu. Sensitively responding to the social crisis he lived through, Liang experienced a serious personal crisis in his early years. In contrast to his May Fourth rivals who had received a traditional Chinese education, Liang was a follower of Western utilitarianism and had studied Western knowledge in his childhood, the consequence of a heavy influence from his father Liang Ji 梁济 (1858–1918), who later committed suicide. Liang was soon disappointed by utilitarian theories and converted to Buddhism. Despite claiming himself to be a lifelong Buddhist, he recovered his confidence in Chinese society through a re-interpretation of Confucianism (Liang, 2000). Liang made efforts to integrate his thinking on personhood and national development into a consistent question

that became his lifelong inquiry. By contrast, Hu Shi had separated his role as an intellectual leader for political change from his self-identity as a hermit scholar of Chinese classics.

A key concept identified in Liang’s thought is that of the “inner self.” In Chinese, Liang calls this concept *shen xin da yuan* 深心大愿 (Liang, 2012). The direct translation is a deep and big heart. I use the term “inner self” to refer to Liang’s notion of *shen xin da yuan* because it reflects Liang’s view on the self, a view that only when the individual embraces this “deep and big heart” does s/he touch the stable sense of self, the self not easily impacted and dominated by the changing environment. This sense of self is the inner resource for the individual to cope with his/her relationship to society and to develop an organic and evolving relationship with others. The self may then be developed into a broader vision that embraces others as part of the self. By reaching the inner self, Liang realized the integrity of his self in his dedication to intellectual and political life (Liang, 2012).

Liang’s View on Individuality: Building Continuous Connection with Others through Inner Self

Liang criticized Hu Shi’s approach of developing the “small self for the big self” on several occasions. In the responses to the “Li Chao Event,”⁴ Hu Shi and other May Fourth liberal intellectuals all criticized the vices of the traditional family system that prevented women’s liberation (Liu, 1994). However, Liang Shuming adopted a different perspective and commented that cultivating the inner self is the best approach to support the independence of the individual (Liu, 1994). Liang also opposed Hu’s idea of “the immortality of the big self” (Hu, 2006, p. 34), arguing that the idea of committing the self to serving society was misleading for the individual, especially for youth, despite sounding lofty and meaningful. Liang argued that this attitude was irrelevant to the solution of real problems that many youth faced during the radically changing society of the time: vanity, uncertainty about the future, purposelessness, or a loss of significance in living. Amid this rapid social change, the attitude of committing the self to serving society was irrelevant to the individual’s pursuit of the meaning of life.

⁴ “Li Chao Event”: Li Chao was a female student at the National Beijing Female Normal School. Her family did not support her study, and she later died from illness in August 1919. Her family even did not care about her death. The attitude of her family aroused public anger, launching substantial debate on the liberation of Chinese women.

This pursuit was an artificial goal created by the leaders of society rather than a goal evolving from the inner experience of the individual, from the impelling need of the heart (Liang, 1991).

Diverging from Hu Shi, Liang made the following claim: “The meaning and value of life cannot be found. If you find one, it must be a fake one. ‘Where is the meaning and value of life’ is not a valid question because life itself has no meaning or value...A real and whole life does not need meaning or value...Leave behind your attitude of ‘looking for’...The so-called responsibility is only to yourself, not to anybody else or to the ‘everlasting immortal big self.’ My responsibility is only to the self, here and now” (Liang, 1991, pp. 763–764).

However, Liang did not advocate attitudes of extreme individualism or nihilism. Instead, he emphasized exploring the possibility of facing the real needs from the body and the heart rather than surrendering oneself to any external and artificial goals before gaining a clear sense of self-identity. His words “don’t look for” do not mean passively doing nothing and leaving the self to whatever s/he is. He continued: “Everybody has some energy in their body. Only when the energy can be released through activities, can life be vivid and happy as well as appropriate. In my opinion, everybody should follow their unique talent and then release the energy inside of their body...In all, find a way to make full use of their energy. This is the happiness of life; this is the meaning of life. Life, then, can be interesting” (Liang, 1991, p. 766). In Liang’s view, only when releasing the energy from the body are we as individuals able to gain power as active and independent agents to do what is necessary, no matter the difficulty. We also gain moral insight to direct our actions.

Liang took this confidence in the energy inside of oneself as the foundation of Confucian thought, making the following claim: “In the Confucian view, *the meaning of life lies in continuously and actively practicing the meaning or significance of life (li, 理) which the individual realizes*” (emphasis added; Liang, 2011, p. 119). This claim suggests Liang’s faith in the individual as an active and independent agent for solving life’s problems. Life blossoms by practicing the meaning of life developed by the individual and not through systemic arrangements outside of the individual’s life. Further, he explained that the meaning/significance of life (*li*) lies in an ethical relationship between the self and others (p. 119). This *li* requires the individual to continuously make efforts to build meaningful connections with others. The efforts involve the integration of understanding and practice in the ongoing situations the individual is in.

From the description of Liang’s understanding on the relation of the individual

and society, we observe that Liang had discarded the dichotomy between the “small self and big self” and considered that this distinction constructed boundaries between the individual and others. Such a distinction thus prevents the individual from making meaningful connections with others, and life becomes mechanical and rigid. Alternatively, Liang (2011) suggested that the individual may gain power as an active and independent agent by releasing the energy within the self. The meaning of one’s own life is thus connected with the life of others. Liang considered this process of releasing the energy within and connecting the self with others as the development of the inner self, or building a deep and big heart.

Inner Self with “*Lixing*”

It appears that this capacity of following one’s unique talent and releasing one’s energy inside is mysterious. In Liang’s (2011) view, although it is difficult to interpret, this condition of humanity is critical to understanding Confucianism as a potential approach for China’s modern transformation. This notion of individual development may correct the misleading dichotomy wherein “the small self” merges into “the big self” and avoid leading the individual into a mechanical or instrumentalist way of life.

In Liang’s earlier works, such as *Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies*, Liang (2000) used the concept of “intuition” to describe the capacity of the individual. Liang considered keen intuition to be “*ren* 仁” (humaneness) in Confucian terms. This creative explanation of Confucianism is key to understanding Liang’s thought. Liang suggests that intuition is an ability that all individuals originally possess that is very keen by nature but that various social habits tend to blunt this keen intuition (Yan, 2004). Therefore, the individual must constantly cultivate the self to maintain his or her intuitive faculty. It is only when the individual is able to follow his or her own needs and to release the energy inside his or her body that s/he can continuously and actively practice the significance or meaning of life as it is experienced without worrying about dogmas imposed by society. In this way, the individual is practicing “goodness” or “humaneness” in his or her own unique way without constructing barriers to meaningful connection with others.

To use keen intuition and realize “goodness,” Liang suggests that we must avoid the deliberate calculation of gain and loss and reach “*gang* 刚” (solidarity). In Confucianism, *gang* is an important character for self-cultivation. It implies the willingness to suffer difficulties and struggles following the decision to be

fully engaged in doing something, to meet the passion and release energy from inside. *Gang* is the inner strength the individual builds through difficulties and struggles. It is also an inner decision the individual must make not to fall into habits or existing conventions but to focus on the present and be open to any new possibilities to create a new self and to escape the bonds constructed by one's environment (Zhang, 2013). In contrast, the dichotomy between the "small self and big self" is far removed from the life of *solidarity*; it creates conditions for the deliberate calculation of gain and loss by distinguishing the small self from the big self. This approach thus blunts the intuition of the individual and leaves "goodness" out of the picture.

In Liang's later works, he uses the conception of *lixing* 理性 (ethical rationality) to replace the conception of intuition, even though his key understanding of Confucianism and his basic belief in the individual as an active and independent agent did not change. The change in the concepts in Liang's thought not only reflected an ideological and political response to different social contexts (Alitto, 1986) but also indicated Liang's continuous engagement with Western thought, which had a critical influence on China's modern transformation (An, 1997; Yan, 2004).

In a modern time deeply molded by science and technology in various social aspects, including human thinking, the concept of intuition was too mysterious and vague. Furthermore, this concept suggested an anti-intellectual trend. Liang did not want to put himself in such a position. Consequently, he used the concept of *lixing* to replace *zhijue* 直觉 (intuition), a concept that appears contradictory with *zhijue*. The word "li" contains *lizhi* 理智 (the meaning of intelligence) as well as *lunli* 伦理 (ethical feeling; Liang, 2011, p. 81). *Lixing* is *renxin zhi miaoyong* 人心之妙用 (the subtle use of the mind) and suggests an intelligent method of thinking that does not rely solely on strict reasoning based on pre-defined principles. This approach receives all types of human feelings as the foundation of ethical relationships between the self and others. In Liang's words, *lixing* includes *xiangshang zhixin qiang, xiangyu zhixin hou* 向上之心强, 相与之心厚 (seeking perfection of the self and intensively communicating with affection to others; Liang, 2012, p. 192). It includes personal feelings based on the individual's evolving understanding of relations with others and his or her effort to reach meaningful connections with others, including nature and the cosmos. Meanwhile, Liang suggests that although everybody possesses *lixing*, it is easy to lose this sense. Therefore, the individual must continuously cultivate the self to sharpen one's *lixing*, thereby cultivating the inner self.

An Yanming (1997) has explained that Liang's later concept of *lixing* better

meets the spirit of the modern person and is Liang’s creative re-interpretation of Confucianism: “*Lixing* becomes the cornerstone of Chinese ethical society for two reasons. In the first place, *lixing* bestows a precious inner discipline and ethical consciousness and is therefore able to partially fulfill the task of religion to unite the entire nation. This is primarily due to the efforts of Confucius himself, who always encourages people to examine themselves, to ponder everything, dependent on their own minds, and to cultivate their own capabilities of differentiation...Confucius offers people no doctrine except the idea of self-reflection. He teaches people to believe in nothing but their own *lixing*” (p. 353).

In summary, Liang’s concept of *lixing* contains the different aspects of *lizhi* 理智 (intelligence), ethical *lunli* 伦理 (understanding) and *qinggan* 情感 (affective feeling) but does not deviate from any aspect of these constituent concepts. *Lixing* is an effort to reach a harmonious understanding of the self and to thus gain the inner strength to creatively connect with others. It is a modern interpretation of Confucius’ idea of “humaneness” (*ren*). Facing complicated and contradictory life situations, the individual remains an active and independent agent, creatively building connections with others. The author takes this continuous effort to reach *lixing* as the cultivation of the inner self.

Indeed, this status of *lixing* is not a static entity that one may gain once and never lose; it is a never-ending process that the individual is engaged in. It is *miaoyong* 妙用 (the subtle use of mind) that the individual employs as an active and independent agent who is engaged in meaningful connections with the world. Engaging the inner experience to reach *lixing* is a practice of self-cultivation.

Individuality beyond the Dichotomy between “Small Self and Big Self”: Cultivating an Inner Self

To move beyond the dichotomy between the “small self and big self,” an influential ideology in different periods of China’s modern history, we may seek resources from tradition. Liang Shuming’s lifelong efforts to re-interpret Confucianism and to creatively propose the concept of *lixing* inspired me to explore a new understanding of individuality. Through a comparison of Hu Shi and Liang Shuming’s thoughts on individuality, the author suggests an emphasis on cultivating an inner self—a revival of the Confucian tradition of self-cultivation—as a possible approach to practice individuality.

The idea of self-cultivation is not only for perfecting one’s morality for the

sake of one's own goodness, as a conventional understanding of Confucianism might regard it. Instead, understanding self-cultivation in a modern context means that cultivating the mind—intellectually, morally and aesthetically—enables the individual to be an independent agent to creatively deal with various crises in life without losing one's own mind and vision. It is a continuous effort at enriching the self by building meaningful connections with others. The effort of cultivating inner self may foster a stable self-identity and then strengthen one's mind in a radically changing social context (Yu, 2004). In this way, the individual may take action without the dominance of external forces as the sole source of influence.

As the discussion in earlier sections indicates, by releasing energy from within the self, the individual evolves the self by creatively and continuously connecting with the feelings of others, it is the practice of “*lixing*” in Liang's words. By embracing the broader environment that the self is in, the individual practices the cultivation of the inner self. This ongoing practice of self-cultivation provides a critical and creative resource for the individual to break through routine habits and social conventions and to construct the unique but inclusive meaning of his or her life experience by making meaningful connections with others.⁵

Through the exploration of a concept of individuality, which is beyond the dichotomy between “small self and big self,” it is not an intention here to question Hu Shi's contribution in China's modern history, but rather the place to highlight that we must fully understand the limitation of the dichotomy between the “small self and big self,” which remains an influential concept in contemporary Chinese education. This dichotomy prevents the emergence of an active and independent individual as an agent in social life and thus leads to mechanical and instrumentalist approaches to educational practice. The alternative conception of individuality hereby proposed focuses on the possibilities of building meaningful connections with others by cultivating one's inner self: releasing one's unique talents and energy from within and thus enlarging the sense of self as a never-ending process of self-cultivation. According to Liang Shuming (2011), a democratic society is based on the meaningful connection of individuals who are able to share their affective feelings. This ideal urges us to practice a new understanding of individuality by emphasizing the cultivation of an inner self that is not only unique but also inclusive.

⁵ The conception of unique but inclusive individuality is discussed in Zhang's (2013) book *John Dewey, Liang Shuming and China's Education Reform: Cultivating Individuality*.

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