To Believe or Not to Believe: Zhou Zuoren's Alternative Approaches to the Chinese Enlightenment

Tonglu Li

Iowa State University, tongluli@iastate.edu

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Abstract
Resistances against May Fourth "enlightenment" (qimeng) have been celebrated as alternative versions of modernity that "decenter and destabilize" the mainstream paradigm (Chow et al. 2008: 3). But in this alternative modernities program, the complexity of the so-called center is often overlooked. Within the May Fourth movement, there are irreducible differences in position and different strategies of position taking. As Wang Hui (1997: 310) points out, what the May Fourth thinkers shared was only a common attitude toward tradition, not a unified theory; their proposals for establishing "newness" were quite different from each other. Surveying the roles the journal New Youth (Xin qingnian) and the Literary Association (Wenxue yanjiu hui) played, Wang Xiaoming (1999) challenges the May Fourth paradigm by arguing that it repressed various literary trends and individuality and promoted a pragmatic, "pro-collectivity" view of literature. Michel Hockx (1999) rejoins that to further understand the complexity of history, the pluriformity within the May Fourth cannot be overlooked and a binary view of history needs to be avoided. Therefore, although treating the May Fourth as a totality against a broader historical background might be justified, it is equally important to pay attention to its internal differences and tensions, particularly to marginalized trends and figures. In light of the ongoing scholarly reflections on the May Fourth and Chinese modernity, I now focus on just such a historically marginalized figure who was once a leading member of the May Fourth camp, Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967), and explore how his imagination and critique of enlightenment constituted a counter model to some mainstream ideas and practices.

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To Believe or Not to Believe: Zhou Zuoren’s Alternative Approaches to the Chinese Enlightenment†

Tonglu Li

It is said that those who sold their soul to the Devil became shadowless men. The same can be said about those who dedicated their soul to God. Those who do not believe in the existence of the soul are probably safe, because they do not have anything to sell and therefore can stand outside of trouble, even though they cannot avoid being condemned by others.

—Zhou Zuoren (1935: 483)

Introduction

Resistances against May Fourth “enlightenment” (qimeng) have been celebrated as alternative versions of modernity that “decenter and destabilize” the mainstream paradigm (Chow et al. 2008: 3). But in this alternative modernities program, the complexity of the so-called center is often overlooked. Within the May Fourth movement, there are irreducible differences in position and different strategies of position taking. As Wang Hui (1997: 310) points out, what the May Fourth thinkers shared was only a common attitude toward tradition, not a unified theory; their proposals for establishing “newness” were quite different from each other.

† This article is a revision of the third chapter of my dissertation, Beyond Belief: Zhou Zuoren’s Rationalist Writing and the Chinese Enlightenment. During the revision, Dr. Rania Huntington provided many suggestions. I also thank the two MCLC reviewers for their insightful comments, and Kirk A. Denton for his meticulous editing.
Surveying the roles the journal New Youth (Xin qingnian) and the Literary Association (Wenxue yanjiu hui) played, Wang Xiaoming (1999) challenges the May Fourth paradigm by arguing that it repressed various literary trends and individuality and promoted a pragmatic, “pro-collectivity” view of literature. Michel Hockx (1999) rejoins that to further understand the complexity of history, the pluriformity within the May Fourth cannot be overlooked and a binary view of history needs to be avoided. Therefore, although treating the May Fourth as a totality against a broader historical background might be justified, it is equally important to pay attention to its internal differences and tensions, particularly to marginalized trends and figures. In light of the ongoing scholarly reflections on the May Fourth and Chinese modernity, I now focus on just such a historically marginalized figure who was once a leading member of the May Fourth camp, Zhou Zuoren (1885–1967), and explore how his imagination and critique of enlightenment constituted a countermodel to some mainstream ideas and practices.¹

Zhou has been highly regarded as an essayist; however, his contributions as an enlightenment thinker have not been fully recognized. From the late 1910s to the mid-1940s, he wrote numerous miscellaneous essays that can be characterized as fragmentary, intertextual, random, and versatile. During this period, Zhou was part of various intellectual trends, such as humanism, cosmopolitanism, individualism, and anarchism, and he eventually turned to nationalism and Confucianism (Kiyama 2004: 86). But it needs to be pointed out that neither the “nationalism” nor the “Confucianism” Kiyama mentions should be taken at face value, because Zhou recognized the former as a necessary condition for individual survival and development and the latter as a version of individualistic humanism.² Despite their formal and thematic complexity, Zhou’s essays demonstrate a surprising constancy by focusing on an overarching theme: enlightenment, as he summarized in 1946.³ Zhou set as the mission for his enlightenment project to illuminate readers (as individuals) with modern (rational and scientific) knowledge

¹ By “mainstream” I mean the ideas and practices that were once prominent in the cultural field during the Republican period, such as the May Fourth’s attack on tradition, the leftist movement, and the various modernization endeavors led by the KMT government (such as the “New Life” movement [Dirlik 1975]) in the 1930s, and the culture of national defense against the Japanese in the 1940s. These ideas and practices have often been recognized as “mainstream” in the official historical writing during the post-Republican period in either the Mainland or Taiwan. Zhou’s marginalization in official historical writing is due mainly to two factors: his critical attitude toward mainstream approaches during the 1930s, and his collaboration with the Japanese during the war in the 1940s. This marginalization of Zhou started to change in the 1980s. See Huang 1999: 205–288, and Sun/Huang 2004: 1–9.

² Even though Zhou was very familiar with the Chinese cultural heritage and since the 1930s had a public image as a “semi-Confucian and semi-Buddhist” hermit, what he carried out toward traditional learning is a reevaluation and rediscovery based on his humanist and rationalist position, not a simple “return” to tradition (Qian 2004: 9).
In 1946, Zhou summarized his intellectual career in a poem entitled “My Writings.” Borrowing Buddhist concepts, he expressed the idea that he did not despise utilitarianism, but that he had his own vows (shiyuan). Regarding writing as a sincere activity of giving dharma (fashi, truth and law) to the public, he wished that one or two among his numerous works would have some influence, and he would not worry about being vilified as long as his books still had readers. He wrapped up the poem by saying that his intent in such an undertaking had been constant over the years (1946: 33). His endeavor to offer dharma to the public through writing became the defining characteristic of his enlightenment project.

As a writer, Zhou adjusted his positions and his rhetorical strategies for different historical contexts. His writing career can be approximately periodized as follows: (a) 1918–1922. Zhou set a humanistic tone for the new literature with his ideas of a “literature of humanity,” a contribution that has been well recognized (Lee 1973: 20; Daruvala 2000: 43), and he was actively engaged in criticizing Chinese traditions; (b) 1923–1927. During this period he gradually noticed dangerous tendencies in the practices of the May Fourth camp—a violent attitude toward tradition and a tendency to establish itself as a new cultural hegemony—and he eventually dissociated himself from it; (c) 1928–1938. He criticized the rising leftist literary movement directly and indirectly, regarding it as a betrayal of the true mission of enlightenment and carried out an enlightenment project of his own (Ji 2010: 30); (d). 1939–1945. Besides his public obligations in collaborating with the Japanese occupation government, he continued his enlightenment project, with an emphasis on the cultural identity of Chinese people. During the 1930s and the 1940s, Zhou avoided engaging in political and intellectual debates and focused on the historical, the everyday, and insignificant matters. His hostility toward mainstream practices, his obscure writing style and invocation of traditional expressions, categories, and forms, along with his collaboration with the Japanese, made him the counter-image of his older brother Lu Xun, and his enlightenment project became a pleasure for his own entertainment—not a means to sociopolitical revolution, but an end in itself, a process that can be enjoyed without worrying about the results.

In this essay, I read Zhou’s complex writings as a systematic and coherent construction of his alternative approach to enlightenment, instead of as random responses to the crises and contingencies of history. Such a reading strategy is inspired by Susan Daruvala, who has analyzed the particular ways in which Zhou formulated his individual-focused alternative response to the...
dominant discourses in the context of Chinese modernity. As Daruvala (2000: 11–12) summarizes, Zhou accomplished it “first, by his use of traditional aesthetic categories; second, by the importance he ascribed to locality in a writer’s identity and self-representation; and third, by constructing a literary history in opposition to the dominant one.” Focusing on the “leisure literature” created by Zhou, Lin Yutang, and others in the 1930s, Charles Laughlin (2008: 12) argues that their essays constituted an alternative to the “redemptive literature,” which mainly concerns grand projects. Laughlin also highlights Zhou’s invocation of the late Ming tradition in the process of formulating his strategies “alternative” to the mainstream. Although “tradition” did play an important role in Zhou’s alternative approach, it is also a category he reinvented based on his understanding of the rather “Western-oriented” concept of enlightenment. Although marginalized for its insignificance relative to the grand projects of the day, Zhou’s form of enlightenment allows us to understand not only the intellectual foundation of his literary creation, but also the complexity of the modern intellectual field. By analyzing its intellectual framework, its critique of both traditional beliefs and the religiosity of modern mainstream practices, and its agenda to disenchant people with knowledge, I argue that Zhou’s alternative approach to enlightenment based on the dichotomy of knowledge and belief constituted the most comprehensive criticism of the mainstream practices of his time. In insightfully critiquing the mainstream practices of producing blind followers of political and ideological struggles, Zhou developed a disinterested, knowledge-based version of enlightenment to disenchant people, and that disenchantment was destined to be repressed in the historical context of China.

Knowledge vs. Belief: (Re)Defining the Foundation of the Enlightenment

One of the most learned intellectuals in modern China, Zhou Zuoren regarded “knowledge” as a central issue of modernity, so much so that he
named his studio “the Hall of Knowledge” (Zhitang). Since his early years studying in Japan (1906–1911), he extensively read works of literature, Greek mythology, psychology, anthropology, medical history, folk studies, and intellectual and religious history, all of which are facets of Zhou’s larger pursuit of “learning of humanity” (renxue) (Huang 1999: 3). Among his diverse interests, Andrew Lang’s cultural anthropology, Havelock Ellis’s sexual psychology, and Darwinian biology worked together to enable Zhou to shift his attention from society or the nation as a totality to human beings as individual entities entitled to satisfy their culturally mediated desires while bound by biological constraints: as an individual, one should be concerned less with one’s obligation as a subject of the state than with constructing an everyday life with artistic taste, but more important, one should approach the world with knowledge instead of belief.

During the first half of the 1920s, Zhou sought to forge a universal epistemological foundation for the enlightenment project; such a foundation was developed out of his long-term intellectual struggle with the dichotomous relationship between knowledge and belief. Having received less attention in modern China than in the European Enlightenment, the dichotomy is central in Zhou’s conceptualization of enlightenment. He once passionately introduced the utopian New Village movement, which originated in Japan in 1918, but soon became aware that he did not have the necessary passion and faith for promoting the movement. In commenting on the Bible, he recognized that to have a faith is to accept wholeheartedly an external authority as the source of truth. A belief, to him, is delusive and marks the denial of human rationality (1920: 39). In 1921, he experienced more intense intellectual anxiety: he suffered from a “weakness” that prevented him from becoming a dedicated follower of one belief, and that made it a struggle to decide which path to take (1921b: 22–23). The year 1923 saw a critical turn in his personal and intellectual life: a breakup with Lu Xun and disillusionment with the religious and fanatical pursuit of a new intellectual and social order.

1 After their split, the causes of which are unknown to outsiders, Zhou and Lu Xun seldom exchanged arguments directly. In the 1930s, they became the symbolic leaders of liberal and leftist intellectual positions, respectively, and they debated indirectly by writing on the same cultural and social phenomena. Shu Wu (1993: 291–363) has provided a detailed account of their relationship. See also Wang Xirong 2005: 37–136.
In a discussion on women’s liberation (1923b), Zhou is concerned with a lack of “common knowledge” (changshi) not only among the uneducated, but also among the educated. In his proposal, common knowledge, a simplified version of his “learning of humanity” that approximately corresponded to the high school curricula, was not pragmatic knowledge for solving everyday problems such as cooking or calculating interest, but the instrument to “know thyself,” as the ancient Greek philosopher Thales taught. Knowing oneself means to avoid living unconsciously according to animalistic instincts or social conventions. Only when people truly know themselves as human beings, Zhou believes, could a self-liberation movement come into being (1923b: 1–2). The important message in this text is not about the content of common knowledge, but about the mission of enlightenment: enlightenment should not use indoctrination to replace conventional beliefs with knowledge, but instead should create modern rational individuals who could avoid blindly following established doctrines or external authorities.  

Zhou observed that knowledge is often treated as dogma; people tend to preserve temporary views of life, which are based mainly on limited experiences and knowledge, and reshape them into a singular and unalterable criterion of truth (1923c: 90). When the internal differences are erased and simplified, or when ideas belonging to particular historical moments are eternalized, dynamic and diverse knowledge turns into a rigid and tyrannical doctrine. To Zhou, enlightenment does not mean replacing “old beliefs” with “new knowledge” as unquestionable truth, but a critical attitude toward the “new knowledge” itself; otherwise the “new” will soon become rigid doctrines. The priority of the enlightenment, therefore, should be disseminating common knowledge to enable people to better understand its proper function: “know thyself.”

To know oneself is to become a modern subject. As Zhou confessed in a 1924 essay, he was experiencing at the time a painful process of self-interrogation. He came to realize that he knew nothing, but there were

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6 There seem to be similarities between the views of Zhou and Kant regarding the nature of enlightenment, which Kant (1991: 54) defines as “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another.” However, whereas Kant emphasizes the importance of will (the courage to use one’s reason publicly), Zhou focuses on the cultivation of reason (with scientific knowledge as its basis).
neither mentors who could guide him to form his own worldview “to judge everything” nor “a simple way” to follow (1924d: 334). Ha Yingfei (2007: 80–82) argues that the atheist views of Bertrand Russell played an important role in Zhou’s disillusionment with religion and with social movements characterized by strong religiosity. Russell lectured in Beijing in 1920–1921, and Zhou would have been familiar with his ideas, but there is no acknowledgment of such an influence in Zhou’s writings. I would suggest that his denial of the “simple way” of belief did not come from one influence but from reflection on mainstream intellectual practices. As he later admitted, lack of coherence and consistency notwithstanding, his decentered knowledge system demonstrated a multiplicity and diversity that prevented him from adhering to a single intellectual way (1934b: 406).

Zhou once discussed belief and knowledge as equal modes of approaching the world in relation to action in his commentary on Turgenev’s view of Don Quixote and Hamlet:

According to Turgenev, the protagonists of these famous works embody two fundamentally opposing types of human nature, which are the ultimate source of culture and thought: Don Quixote embodies faith and idealism, and Hamlet embodies skepticism and analysis. With enthusiasm, the former approaches the truth in which he believes even at the cost of life. The latter criticizes society according to rationality, and eventually becomes an egoist who cannot even have faith in himself. (1922c: 576–577)

These opposing types of human nature provided Zhou a framework for understanding the conundrum he had experienced in his participation in the mainstream enlightenment movement: faith and idealism might lead to blind belief and violence, but they constitute the fundamental drive for action; skepticism and analysis are crucial for the individual to avoid living an unexamined life, but might become a hindrance to dedicated action. As Turgenev does in his analysis, Zhou tries to reconcile the two extreme qualities by viewing them as complementary as well as contradictory, but he
later comes to see them as incompatible and eventually rejects all doctrines.

At a time when enlightenment was losing out to national salvation, Zhou insisted on thinking in a more philosophical way; he refused to accept the Nationalist or the Communist discourses on national salvation and revolution because of their innate religiosity. The 1930s marked both the end of the mainstream enlightenment and the rising influence of leftist culture. As Lu Xun turned to the leftist camp, and the liberal Hu Shi sought to reform society through elites working within the KMT government, Zhou eventually chose to observe and contemplate the world from a distance, refusing to bow to the pressure to join social movements:

Some might think they are blessed for having a simple faith. For me, however, I am fonder of a pure and clear contemplation of the world. Life and society are too complicated. Still, accurate observations are more interesting than chanting and praying, though I have chosen to fall into hell and there might not be a way out for the rest of my life. (1928c: 490)

His words “fall into hell” cannot be dismissed as hyperbole; he clearly understood the criticism he was going to face from the leftist camp, whose spiritual leader was his older brother, Lu Xun. From the late 1920s, Zhou was publicly vilified as a hermit who sought to escape harsh realities and was unable to catch up with the progressive trends of his time. The term “simple faith” (danchun de xinyang) demonstrates his rejection of the religious impulse to embrace a single school of thought and its coherent system for judging all things (1927e: 38). A simple faith, or an unconditional trust in and devotion to an ultimate authority (God, in religious terms), could offer him nothing more than intellectual simplicity. Having a simple faith did not mean only an unwavering faith in the existence of God; it also meant relying on such a faith as the ultimate arbiter of truth.

In Zhou’s view, knowledge was an antidote to belief, and the dissemination of common knowledge, or the knowledge people use to
understand themselves as human beings, was the only viable approach to eliminating popular superstitions and other unfounded beliefs. Radical sociopolitical measures would not succeed without such knowledge. He writes, “To eliminate such superstitions and outdated ethical codes, we have to resort to scientific knowledge. Laws can erase the superficial external appearances, but only science can eradicate their roots” (1928b: 476). In other words, institutional legal action cannot affect the way people think. Seven years later, Zhou restated his views in discussing the meaning of the ambiguous term fenghua (decency, or the improvement of morals and manners): there are many such ambiguous and mystical terms in the Chinese language, and “people have been using them as the non-construable and grotesque magic figures (fuzhou) in the Daoist religion. I think the cure is common knowledge. This seems to be a prescription of the eighteenth century, but it might be the right one in China, where people do not have a healthy consciousness” (1935b: 601–602). Even during a time of national crisis, when the Japanese army had occupied Manchuria and was on the verge of a full-scale assault, Zhou remained obsessed with ideas of enlightenment and saw disseminating common knowledge as his primary concern.

Zhou’s full embrace of knowledge and total rejection of belief occurred in the 1930s and went hand in hand with a new self-identification. To him, historically formed knowledge is incompatible with belief (1936f: 348). With a clear awareness of the differences between the Greek and Christian traditions in the West, he chose to be affiliated with the former. In a 1934 essay, he declared, “I feel that I have finished being a literātus (wenshi). Now if I am to be categorized, and if I have to find a dignified title for myself, I will use ‘lover of wisdom (aizhizhe).’ This only means that I still have some interest in worldly affairs, and I want to know something about them” (1934f: 369). The term wenshi, which appeared in many of Zhou’s essays, is also the translation of “scribe” in the Bible. In retrospection, he regarded wenshi as those who knew only how to use writing to promote
or defend certain doctrines but did not have any profound understanding
of the real world. Zhou chooses “lover of wisdom,” the original meaning
of the ancient Greek term for “philosopher,” and avoids the modern term
“philosopher” (zhexuejia) to indicate that he is concerned with principles of
the real world, not “metaphysical issues” (xuanxue) (1937f: 699). A lover of
knowledge, Zhou dedicated himself to providing his own observations of
the world, refusing to share ideological premises with other intellectuals.

By the late 1930s, Zhou pushed this reasoning to such an extreme that
he dismissed the significance not only of domestic political and ideological
struggles but also of the ongoing war with Japan. Following the Greek
paradigm, he promoted the attitude “knowing for knowing’s sake,”
which he regarded as an antidote to the obsession with pragmatic issues
in Chinese culture. In one essay, Zhou introduces S. H. Butcher’s views on
the Greek love of knowledge:

From the dawn of history, to know seemed to the Greeks to be in
itself a good thing apart from all results. They had a keen-eyed
and disinterested curiosity for the facts of outward nature, for
man—his ways and his works—for Greeks and Barbarians, for the
laws and institutions of other countries. They had the traveller’s
mind, alert in observing and recording every human invention and
discovery. (Butcher 1904: 92; Zhou 1936e: 488–489)

Zhou fully accepts Butcher’s nostalgic imagination of the Greeks’ pure
pursuit of knowledge, and he exemplified this attitude himself perfectly
when one month after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in July 1937, Zhou
wrote an essay on the vernacular names of various weeds (1937e: 96);
this seemingly trivial matter is presented as a way to persuade readers
to investigate Chinese dialects and folk cultures, through which common
people’s real life and thought could be learned. His indifference toward
the looming war received harsh and often unfounded criticism (Shu Wu
1993: 60).
At a time when national salvation was the focus of the intellectual community, Zhou repeatedly wrote about and justified his interests in ghosts, arguing that even though documents on belief in the supernatural did not tell the “scientific” truth about life and death, they were valuable articulations of the subjective truth of human life, inherent and genuine human emotions, and “joy, fear and their desire” (1934c: 288–289). He wrote, “People may wonder, Even if you do have leisure time, why do you [waste it] talking about river ghosts? True, I do not have to talk about river ghosts, but the belief related to river ghosts and the people who hold this belief are worth investigation” (1930a: 649). Therefore, instead of simply denying the ridiculous ideas and rites used in memorializing the dead, condemning them as superstition or arbitrarily banning them, he supported research on “life after death,” modeled after the cultural anthropologist James Frazer. He believed that a solid ethnography of the life of ghosts could better reveal the truth of the Chinese people’s psyche than empty talk about native moral values (1935e: 138).

Focusing on the individual’s intellectual maturation through acquiring common knowledge, Zhou imagined an alternative enlightenment. His obsession with knowledge, instead of with popular doctrines, revealed the tension between enlightenment as an intellectual endeavor and enlightenment as an instrument serving social revolution or national salvation. To him, enlightenment was not a social movement for producing political subjects of the modern nation-state, but a process of cultivating a rational attitude among individual citizens. Such objectives should be independent of, and irreducible to, the grand projects. He tried to convince his audience that common knowledge was relevant to real life and ultimately beneficial to it. Even during the war, Zhou promoted the idea that knowledge, rather than social and political engagement, was the best way to “save oneself” (1944b: 109–110). This was particularly urgent in China where the “knowing for knowing’s sake” attitude was urgently needed (1944f: 248). Zhou’s urgency was obviously out of step
with the times, when national salvation was a sacred duty and nationalism threatened to drown out any alternative voices.¹⁰

Traditions Rediscovered: Popular Beliefs Regarding Nature, Sexuality, and the Body

Zhou Zuoren shared with other May Fourth enlightenment thinkers, such as Chen Duxiu, a disdain for traditional Chinese culture. But whereas Chen Duxiu centered his attack on the Confucian ethical system, Zhou adopted a cultural anthropological perspective in his critiques. Such a perspective enabled him to pay attention to diverse cultural practices, including the Daoist religion, which he interpreted as a form of shamanism and which he saw as the dominant belief in Chinese society.¹¹ In the picture of country life he painted in his writings, the resistance to reform or modernization was rooted in the villagers’ beliefs in ghosts, magic, alchemy, and miracles. With such a belief system, they waged wars against Christians, organized their own royal courts and performed rituals ascending to the throne, burned down Western-style schools, rejected government efforts to prevent epidemics or to do social surveys, and practiced magic medicine (1926b: 727). Zhou believed that violent, irrational practices, such as those of the Boxer movement, were at the root of the backwardness of rural life and contaminated the intellectual climate of the whole nation. He might have overgeneralized the nature of Chinese culture as Daoist/shamanistic (in 1925 he even regarded Confucianism as Shamanistic), but in doing so he distanced himself from the Marxist “progressive” view that rural turmoil and conflicts were forms of resistance to foreign cultural invasions and domestic class oppression.

Drawing inspiration from Andre Lang’s evolutionist cultural anthropology, Zhou saw folk and popular culture as a kind of pathology to diagnose the disease in Chinese peoples’ minds: “Regarding research on Chinese culture, focusing on the highest representative achievements is one approach. Nevertheless, our conclusions might be more accurate if we

¹⁰ For example, Liang Shiqiu once proposed that writings during the war did not always have to be directly related to national defense; he received harsh criticism for these sentiments from leftist intellectuals. Nonetheless, the critics might have ignored that Lu Xun (1936), the most prominent leftist, himself held an opinion similar to that of Liang when he wrote that a soldier also needed everyday leisure besides fighting his battle.

¹¹ Lu Xun had the same opinion as Zhou, but did not invest much energy in exploring the details. See his letter to Xu Shoushang (1918).
focus on the overall average achievements" (1930c: 674). Folk and popular culture represented the consciousness of the majority. He refused to accept the importance of social class in his analysis, arguing that people might live in different political and economic conditions, yet they still had more commonalities than differences in thought. To be more exact, the majority of the populace had the same beliefs despite their different backgrounds. In a project spanning several decades, he spent a significant amount of time analyzing popular cultural texts, with a particular focus on three aspects of traditional Chinese thought that had long been slighted in the mainstream intellectual history but that are crucial for a full understanding of humanity: people’s views of nature, sexuality, and the body.

In the politically charged cultural field of Republican China, discussions of social and cultural conflicts and political and ideological struggles usually dominated. Although “Mr. Science” (Sai xiansheng) was a slogan popular during the May Fourth period, the human-nature relationship did not attract much intellectual attention. Zhou, however, observed that in Chinese culture there was a lack of genuine interest in nature as an object independent of human consciousness. He saw such a lack as detrimental to the construction of the modern self, and he advocated cultivating a scientific attitude among the populace to treat nature as an independent existence. To that end, Zhou believed that genuine interests in botany and zoology should be established first through writings about natural history in literary styles or literary works that emphasize natural history to cultivate people’s interest in nature (1936e: 490). Zhou’s own essays on natural subjects—such as “Plants, Trees, Insects, and Fish: Things Living in Water” (1930a)—manifest his enlightenment agenda in persuading readers to cultivate interests in the apolitical, the trivial, and the natural, although they could also be read as allegorical social commentary.

From another direction, Zhou delineated the ways in which nature had been misrepresented in Chinese culture. The Confucian tradition advocated an overhumanized view of nature by projecting human ethical
codes on natural phenomena and on animals, such as in the owl, the lamb, and the crow. The owl, a symbol of unfiliality in folk culture, was believed to eat its aged mother. Zhou rebuffed: “The legend that ‘the owl eats its mother’ might have existed since ancient times. Even so, there is nothing abnormal with the owl except for its unusual appearance and voice. There is no evildoing, just behaving as a carnivorous animal” (1935d: 743–744). The lamb kneeling down to its mother when suckling and the crow feeding its aged mother were seen as positive examples of filial piety (1936e: 490). Though these kinds of stories were perhaps justified to convey didactic agendas, they hindered people from seeing the truth of nature.

The Daoist religion distorted nature by providing a mystical interpretation of natural phenomena, such as the idea that living things can transform from one species into another. In his extensive reading of Qing dynasty biji (jotting notes) during the 1930s and 1940s, Zhou encountered numerous cases such as “corn earworm transforms into thread-waisted wasp, and rotten grass transforms into firefly, all seem to resemble the metamorphosis capability of Daoist fairy figures” (1936c: 127); he attributed the origin of these time-honored beliefs to inaccurate observations, which later generations accepted without critical examination (1938: 82). He believed that such popular beliefs were still alive among modern people, and that it was more important to cleanse them of these beliefs than to promote resistance to Japan, for instance. In 1943, he planned to write a modern version of the Balanced Inquiries (Lunheng), modeled after Wang Chong’s original treatise, to correct these unfounded beliefs (1943b: 777), but such a plan never materialized.14

Zhou explored the roots of the repression of human desires from the perspectives of biology, cultural anthropology, and sex psychology, and he argued that human beings were essentially part of nature and had to be understood as such. Biology enabled Zhou to define human nature as universal,15 which laid the intellectual foundation, starting in the late 1920s when Marxism became a dominant trend, for a rejection of the Marxist

14 Wang Chong (27–97 CE) wrote Balanced Inquiries to criticize the metaphysical and mysterious interpretation of the heaven-human relationship that was popular during the Han dynasty.

15 The role that biological traits play in human nature is still debated in cultural anthropology. See McCurdy/Spradley 1987: 15–48 for representative opinions.
definition of man as economic animal whose nature is defined by his social class. To him, “human beings evolved from animals” (1918: 86), so biology was foundational to an understanding of human life. Darwinism was introduced in China mainly as a social theory, and social Darwinism had dominated intellectual discourse since the late Qing (Pusey 1983). Zhou was unusual in terms of his loyalty to the biological implications of Darwin’s theories. In Zhou’s words, “I do not believe that there exists a classic in the world that can be used eternally as the ultimate doctrine to guide human life. Only biology that records the life of organisms qualifies to be a reference for human beings to establish their morality” (1919: 130); this statement can be regarded as his fundamental understanding of human nature. For Zhou, it was important to explore what is common to humans, what things are necessary and healthy in human life, as well as both the evolution and the degradation of human life (1934a: 354). The biological nature of human beings is a blessing and a curse: they evolved from “animals” and the basic needs and desires should be regarded as legitimate; as part of nature, they had to give up the illusory pursuit of the transcendental world.

Biology alone, however, could not establish the legitimacy of human desire. When sexuality became a major site for contesting gender inequality during the May Fourth movement, Zhou turned to cultural anthropology for strategies to reveal the absurdity of traditional restrictions on sexuality. Starting from the 1920s, Zhou wrote numerous essays criticizing the disciplining of sexual conduct; he concluded that the superstitions on sexuality in folk beliefs and ethical codes could be traced back to shamanism. Most of the taboos were out of the fear of the magic power of sexual conduct:

China is not a nonreligious country, though magical factors might be more dominant in people's thought than the religious ones. Fenghua, the favorite term of supporters of the Confucian ethical codes, is very mystical. It bears significant supernatural implications
“The survival of the savage” (manxing de yiliu) in modern times is a concept he borrowed from cultural anthropologist E. B. Tylor. By demystifying the term fenghua and defining it as “savage” (yeman de), Zhou intends to destroy its legitimacy in regulating sexual conduct. In the same essay, he continues to argue that to understand the Confucian ethical codes, one had to understand shamanism and that Confucianism was only a form of shamanism with a civilized appearance. One might question how “scientific” Zhou’s cultural anthropological approach is—after all, “savage” is more a moral judgment than a “scientific” category—but Zhou widened the debate about the tradition’s views of sexuality and situated what had been regarded as something essentially “Chinese” in a broader intellectual context.

To understand the various forms of sexuality, Zhou resorted to the sex psychology of Havelock Ellis (1859–1939), whose seven-volume work, Studies in the Psychology of Sex, had become Zhou’s “book of enlightenment” since the time he studied in Tokyo in the 1910s. In retrospect, Zhou admitted that Ellis helped him understand the diversity and complexity of human behavior and taught him to contemplate it with a sympathetic attitude that was always ready to understand, tolerate, and accept any natural sexual behavior (1936a: 344), even “perverted” practices such as cunnilingus (a term for which Zhou could not find a corresponding expression in Chinese). Ellis’s point was that this practice (cunnilingus) was natural because it also existed among animals and savage races; only when it became exclusively sexual did it become pathologically perverted (1933b: 167). Zhou embraced Ellis’s spirit of tolerance toward the full range of human sexuality.

Inspired by Ellis, Zhou developed the idea of renqing wuli (human emotions and the principles of things) as a criterion to judge human behavior. The term renqing wuli first appeared in He guanzi (Pheasant cap master), a book believed to have been written during the Warring States
The debate on the nature of Chinese medicine continues today and is still within the discourses set by the intellectuals of the Enlightenment in the 1920s. The key issue is still whether Chinese medicine is scientifically founded.

Some earlier thinkers such as Liang Qichao (1873-1929) also held hostile attitudes toward Chinese medicine. In this passage, Ellis highlights—above law, morality, and even science—the critical role of human emotions in judging human sexual conduct. The balancing and blending of science and emotions that Ellis advocates was central to Zhou's writing, and “the principles of things and human emotions” became a core concept in his struggle against old moral and legal regulations and the popular metaphysical ideas about human behavior.

With the goal of cleansing irrational beliefs from people's minds, Zhou investigated the medical treatment of the body. He examined traditional Chinese medicine, in part by reading medical histories such as Superstition in Medicine, by Hugo Magnus (1842–1907), and The History of Medicine, by C. G. Cumston (1868–1928). In the twentieth century, traditional Chinese medicine came to be regarded as unscientific, mystical, and “metaphysical”; indeed, it was nearly abolished by the KMT government in 1929. In response, doctors of Chinese medicine claimed that it was part of the “national essence” (guocui). Zhou shared a hostility toward Chinese medicine with other participants of the May Fourth Enlightenment such as Lu Xun, Chen Duxiu, and Hu Shi. But Zhou was the only one to contextualize its development in terms of a universal medical discourse. He sought the irrational “roots” of Chinese medicine. Borrowing Cumston's
idea that medicine progressed along a historical line from instinctive, religious, and magic to scientific medicine, he provided his interpretation in a 1928 essay:

Human civilization is a unity in that humanity is a unity. Cultural differences originated from people’s different orientations in channeling their desires. Nevertheless, all cultures observe the same principles of humanity. . . . Therefore, there is only one knowledge and art. Since people discover universal principles at different times, there are different forms of knowledge and art; but the differences are in degree, not in essence. (1928d: 492)

Zhou avoids essentialized views of the cultural difference between China and the West and assesses both according to the same universal notions of progress in medicine. In this respect, Chinese medicine is not a national essence, but an earlier stage of the general development of medical knowledge.

Zhou observed numerous cases in which magic and superstitions were widely applied in Chinese medicine, such as the use of human flesh as medicine; selling one’s disease to others by packaging money and throwing it on the roadside for others take away; escaping from malaria by moving to other places; and women’s passing their leprosy on to others through sexual intercourse.\(^\text{18}\) Surveying these popular beliefs and practices and speculating on the overall situation in China, Zhou was skeptical that China was already a modern, “civilized” society. In a 1927 essay, he stresses the urgency for promoting scientific knowledge and eliminating superstitions in medicine:

It is easy to imagine how much worse the overall situation will be in China, if superstition is allowed in the physiological and pathological fields in which the validity of a statement could be easily verified by science. It is no wonder that politics, morality, and human activities are all occupied by superstition. The revival or survival of the savage in modern times becomes unavoidable. These issues should not be ignored. The cliché “promoting science

\(^{18}\) For examples of such writings, see Zhou 1926a, 1937d.
and eliminating superstition” is indeed the most important project for national salvation. (1927f: 171)

Here Zhou establishes a connection between the “trivial” issues regarding the care of the body and the grand project of national salvation. Yet in his writings the individual body is treated not as a symbol of the (sick) national body, but as what needed to be saved from the curse of superstition so that it could constitute the very foundation of national salvation. For Zhou, political or social reform was bound to fail without a successful replacement of “savage” thoughts with scientific knowledge.

The theoretical framework Zhou applied in his criticism of Chinese traditions can be generally defined as evolutionary, an anthropological theory that “provided a hierarchical scale of civilization on which classical Greece and Rome were clearly ranked as superior to primitive societies” (Humphreys 1978: 2). China was relegated to the lower end of this hierarchical scale, because no matter how the social or political structure changed, what dominated people’s consciousness were the same old “savage” beliefs. Zhou’s reluctance to adjust his position to follow the “progressive” social trends was the product of his strong faith in the intrinsic value of the enlightenment. Whereas other enlightenment intellectuals were talking about enlightenment in the past tense and moving on to the promotion of sociopolitical and ideological movements, Zhou insisted that the mission of the enlightenment had yet to be accomplished.

**Resistance against the “Return of the Dead”: Enlightenment as Self-Reflection**

Even as he explored, along with other thinkers, the modern legacy of traditional beliefs, Zhou reflected carefully on the practices of the mainstream enlightenment itself; in this, Zhou distinguished himself as a critical thinker. His critical attitude toward the “new” intellectual movement emerged from his own reflections on Chinese traditions. In his 1920 essay
on shamanistic thought in the countryside cited earlier, he proposes two solutions for eliminating shamanism: let it evolve into a monotheist religion or let it die out in the face of scientific thought. Zhou discussed the first approach only once, in 1921, and he soon gave it up (1921c: 354). He dropped the second radical approach when republishing the essay in 1926:

What I wanted to revise is that now I think it is impossible to have “radical and thorough” changes. It is useless to carry out the scientific movement in the fashion of a missionary movement. The best way is to popularize education and resort to the rationality of citizens. It is a pity that the current educational institutions are not reliable in developing rationality, and there is less hope for such a development. (1926b: 729)

What Zhou finds lacking in mainstream practice is not the idea of promoting science, but the ways in which science is promoted. His denial of the possibility of the “radical and thorough” change is actually a denial of any revolutionary approach, which he regards as inherently religious and violent. Therefore, “the scientific movement carried out in a fashion of a missionary movement” would end up turning against its own objectives. The cultivation of rationality among the public through education also seemed impossible. After Zhou continuously revised his position, few options were left to imagine the enlightenment as a social movement.

Zhou’s abandoning of his earlier approaches resulted from both his self-reflection and his observations of the enlightenment movement. In the early 1920s, he criticized the radical approaches that were based on a belief of scientism, and he defended the legitimacy of mythology and the pedagogical use of myth. Although “unscientific,” myth as the product of human psychology could not be simply dismissed as “backward”; it should be used in developing children’s imagination and acquiring scientific knowledge (1922a: 530). From a scientific perspective, myth reflects the historical development of the human psyche (1922d: 563–565). To Zhou, the problems with those who opposed using myth in children’s education were
that “they have mistaken myth as facts and scientific knowledge. Therefore, they think that by reading myth, children will become superstitious for the rest of their lives, and even scientific knowledge cannot cure the problem.” In his view, “superstition is harmful only when it is regarded as factual. If we recognize that it is not real, we can turn to focus on its aesthetic dimension” (1924c: 329). Scientific knowledge serves in the cultivation of self-awareness that allows one to differentiate the factual from the fictional, not for turning myth into a new belief. The “unscientific,” the “backward,” and the “superstitious” should all be subject to rational evaluation, not excluded.

Zhou then turned the tables against the scientism-minded attackers of myth, arguing that the true believers of the magic power of myth were not those who studied them, but those who harshly attacked them; there was nothing “scientific” in their hostility toward mythology. In a 1924 essay, Zhou writes: “Regarding myth, people either believe it or reject it. Actually, both attitudes are the same in nature. Though they flaunt [their faith in] science, [the critics of myth] still ponder the possibility of believing in myth.” He goes on to say: “those who attack Christianity are still Christians. Those who deny Confucianism are still Confucians” (1924b: 432). The enlightenment attack on mythology (and on tradition in general) derived from a fear rooted in a fundamental belief in and identification with the objects of their attack; the attackers sought to eliminate the objects in the name of science to avoid being affected by their power. With this kind of argumentation, Zhou transforms the enlightenment intellectuals into believers of superstition and tradition and problematizes their scientist goals. Such an analysis of the psychological state of these intellectuals may be speculative, but Zhou’s point is that in relying on radical approaches, the mainstream enlightenment went awry. The only solution was to avoid the belief/disbelief dichotomy and cultivate a “skeptical and tolerant attitude” and to “do research on it with a sober mind” (1924b: 432).

Zhou’s apprehension of the dangerous tendencies in the mainstream...
practice emerged from his strong objection to the Anti-Christian Movement. The movement, in which many May Fourth intellectuals participated, proposed to eliminate Christianity in China for the sake of promoting science and resisting imperialist dominance. As Chow Tse-tsung (1960: 324) puts it, “The new confidence in science, knowledge, clear thinking, and agnosticism” was among the popular arguments against religion during the May Fourth. The movement had been fermenting since 1915, but it exploded on the scene in 1922. Along with other beliefs, Christianity became the target of the enlightenment because of its nature as religion (Yang 1994: 48–49). When the World Student Christian Federation (Shijie Jidujiao xuesheng tongmeng) decided to hold its eleventh annual convention in Beijing, students in Shanghai organized the Anti-Christian Student Federation (Fei Jidujiao xuesheng tongmeng) in February 1922. The next month, students in Beijing organized the Anti-Religion Federation (Fei zongjiao da tongmeng), which, though “Anti-Christian” was not in its name, also targeted Christianity. The movement involved academic issues such as whether Christianity was “scientific,” freedom of thought and speech, and the political and social role of Christianity in China (Yang 1994).

The movement was supported by many of the May Fourth enlightenment intellectuals: Chen Duxiu, Cai Yuanpei, Wu Zhihui, Wang Jingwei, Deng Zhongxia, and Wu Yu. Zhou was among the few to voice contrary opinions; he wrote more than ten essays criticizing the movement, with a central focus on the need to protect intellectual freedom.20

Zhou’s essays constituted less a defense of Christianity per se than an apprehension about an emerging intellectual tyranny. For him, the Anti-Christian Movement portended a larger-scale intellectual oppression and persecution. In response to the movement’s proposals, Zhou declared that he could not accept its intolerance of religion, which sounded “too old” to him (1922b: 610). He argued harshly against Chen Duxiu, who supported the movement for its anti-imperialist goals, insisting that the totalitarian approaches of the movement foretold a more general suppression of

20 Lu Xun, notably, kept silent during the debate. Qian Xuantong, Shen Jianshi, Shen Shiyuan, and Ma Yuzao also opposed the movement by signing the “Declaration of Supporters for Freedom of Belief” with Zhou (1922d).
For example, Chen proposed in 1917 that all religions, including Christianity, should be abolished and replaced by science (1917: 253) and in 1918 that the teachings of Christianity are “fabrications, and cannot be proved” (1918: 346). But Chen differentiated Jesus from Christianity as an institution and admitted that the love and spirit of sacrifice embodied by Jesus were lacking among the Chinese (1920: 84). In a 1922 essay, he further separates Christianity and the Church (1922a: 330–332).

Therefore, what was at stake here was neither whether science should prevail over Christianity, nor the legitimacy of resisting the imperialist influence; it was the ways the supporters of the Anti-Christian movement sought to eradicate Christianity. In his understanding, “the anti-religion participants want to eliminate religion itself, to confiscate the property of the church, or to demolish the temples in order to erase superstition and support science” (1927b: 68). For Zhou, such violent approaches in the Anti-Christian movement indicated that the enlightenment, which initially resisted traditional cultural hegemony, came to resemble that very cultural hegemony.

The debates around the Anti-Christianity movement made apparent Zhou’s disagreement with Chen Duxiu (Ozaki 2004: 161–162; Qian 2004: 205) and some other important May Fourth intellectuals, such as Cai Yuanpei. Zhou saw the movement’s ideas as an unacceptable violation of intellectual freedom. Chen’s attitude toward Christianity was complex, but as a political figure, he sided with the Anti-Christianity movement for both its anticapitalist and its antisuperstition agendas (Chen 1922b: 342). Cai Yuanpei proposed in 1917 to substitute aesthetic education for religion (1917: 30–34). He acknowledged the positive function of religion, which was to satisfy a psychological need, but criticized religion for not being disinterested: whereas religion stimulates emotion, aesthetic education moderates it. In 1921, he further declared that religion as a historical phenomenon was doomed to perish, and philosophy would take its place to become the new belief (1921: 70–71). The proposals of Chen and Cai shared a rationale: religion, particularly Christianity, had to be abolished, whether for political or intellectual reasons.

Zhou insisted that individuals might deny their own religious faith, but religion itself would not perish (1924a: 416), an idea he borrowed from Havelock Ellis, who tried to answer the question How is religion still possible in modern times?
The function of religion, like that of love, is not necessary to life, nor may it with any certainty be stimulated into activity. Need it be? These functions are either working within you or they are not. If not, then it is clear that your organism is in no need of them at the present moment, and perhaps is born without the aptitude to experience them. (Ellis 1924: 11–13; Zhou 1925a: 56)

In Ellis's view, religion is deeply rooted in the unique biological physicality of the individual, but it is not a universal human experience. This implies that the anxiety of both believers’ and nonbelievers’ experience on an individual level and the aggressive dissemination of religion on an institutional level are not necessary. Ellis then argues from another direction, "I do not, indeed, myself think that the inaptitude for the function of religion—ancient as the religious emotions are—represents a higher stage of development." By denying the superiority of atheist thinking, this kind of statement undermined for Zhou the legitimacy of the antireligion movements. Ellis continues, "But I am sure that either the function is there or it is not there, and that no intellectual speculations will take its place or hasten its manifestation. Religion, like love, develops and harmonises our rarest and most extravagant emotions. It exalts us above the commonplace routine of our daily life, and it makes us supreme over the world." With its positive functions, such as enabling believers to transcend the triviality of everyday life, religion needs to be tolerated. Tolerance means recognizing the legitimacy of differences and the diversity of the human condition. Although toward the end of the debate, Zhou eventually acknowledged its positive anti-imperialist goals (Qian 2004: 198–199), he insisted that freedom of belief was uncompromisable and that the violent approaches promoted by the movement were unacceptable. As he further explained later, it was because of the irreducible differences and unbalanced development among human beings that made tolerance necessary: “I know that humans have not developed evenly, and thought cannot and should not be unified. This is why I propose tolerance” (1927d: 393).
Zhou became more skeptical about the mainstream enlightenment, and all other “modern” social and intellectual movements. He was convinced that the enlightenment-inspired intellectual and social movements had taken on a strongly religious character and had become Boxer Movements in spirit. In a 1927 essay, inspired by Liang Shiqiu’s (1998) use of the term to critique the state of modern Chinese literature, Zhou labels “romantic” the literary field and the larger sociopolitical situation (1927c: 98). By “romantic” he means both people’s failure to see reality and their enthusiastic obsession with fanatic political and ideological beliefs. He ridicules the idea that what the era needed were “fantasy and faith” (1930b: 771). For Zhou, the popular trope of “saving the children,” first raised by Lu Xun in his “Diary of a Madman,” was empty sloganeering. To really address the problem of education, people needed to “have solid background knowledge first, and then can they form correct ideas.” He then sharply points out that “enthusiastic faith is not dependable,” and “relying on enthusiastic faith will make us fall into a new arbitrary way of thinking right after getting rid of the old ones” (1934d: 413); here Zhou makes an analogy between modern Chinese history and European history in which the Enlightenment was followed by Romanticism. For Zhou, the change from the “Enlightenment” to the “Romantic” era in China was not progress, it was regress.

In his criticism of modern intellectual and political trends, Zhou invoked the semianthropological and semimetaphorical concept “return of the dead” (gugui chonglai), which he borrowed from Gustave Le Bon and Ibsen; the term suggests that “ghosts” haunt the minds of modern people (1923a: 153–154; 1925d: 224; 1928a: 509–511; 1933a: 135) and expressed his fear of the power of historical heredity, which he understood more metaphorically or culturally than biologically. To resist the “return of the dead” in the modern, Zhou chose to go back to history to identify the historical ghosts. In his “Reading Behind Closed Doors” (1928a), he announces his intention to turn his back on the contemporary world and
to enjoy reading history, a choice that progressive intellectuals criticized as an escape from the harsh reality of the White Terror. With a sarcastic tone, he justifies his decision by stressing the importance of seeking the historical roots of the religious thinking among modern people. He rejects the idea of a “new era” in China and argues that the modern was caught in the shadow of the past and ruled by reincarnated historical ghosts (1928a: 509–511). Through such pessimistic arguments, Zhou rejects the legitimacy of modern claims of “newness” and critiques the hubris of intellectuals who saw themselves as bearers of that newness. This “return of the dead” was not the sporadic “survival of the savage” in the modern; it constituted the “modern” itself.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Zhou dedicated himself to a reexamination of the belief system of the traditional Confucian literātus, the “ghosts” that constantly returned to modern life, by focusing on Qing dynasty jotting notes (biji). Zhou justified his selection by arguing that the jotting notes better revealed their authors’ unconscious minds than did their more formal writings, and he wrote down his findings in a similar style. Compared to the modern sanwen essay, his writings appear archaic, with numerous quotations from the Qing jotting notes accompanied by his own random comments; in terms of content, however, they can be regarded as a unique form of self-expression (Huang 1999: 105). Kiyama (2004: 74) argues that the moral judgments expressed in those essays are similar to those in ancient Confucian texts and in the literati jotting notes. But such a conclusion needs to be qualified: with few exceptions, Zhou offers more a critical revaluation of those moral judgments than an identification with them.

He proposed that in terms of beliefs, the literati as a whole were no different from the less educated populace, who were obsessed with the afterlife:

Among the populace, there are unwritten myths and rites to support the practice of their beliefs. The written texts, including the Yuli chaozhuan, Yinzhi wen, Ganying pian, and Gongguo ge are
all treated equally as part of the Confucian canon by the literati. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that the thought of Chinese literati is dominated by the beliefs in spirits and deities, who control the fortune and disaster in the human world. (1935c: 693–694)

In the texts Zhou mentions here, what prevailed was an imagined order of divine justice, in which retribution, instead of Confucian virtues, was at work. Such texts’ popularity among the literati convinced him that the literati were no more rational or scientific in their way of thinking than the populace, and thus it was impossible for them to enlighten the latter. The only difference between the two, Zhou writes sarcastically, was that literati were reluctant to admit their true beliefs. They concealed it with excuses such as “promoting Confucian moral teaching with the aid of gods and spirits.” In displaying their superiority over the populace, therefore, they invented their own theology with a Confucian mask.

In Zhou’s criticism, it was symptomatic that belief in spirits and deities dominated the literati consciousness. In his essay “On the God of Thunder” (1936b), he introduces the exotic case, recorded by Sun Dezu (1840–1905), of a female paragon of filial piety killed by the god of thunder; the woman turned out to have committed some crime in her early years, and the killing was retribution. Zhou strongly criticizes the rationale behind the tale:

What Sun said is not just that there is a god in charge of our life in the Heaven. He believes that, no matter who issues the judgment, being it the god of thunder, fire, or wind, its judgment could never be wrong. If people were killed, they must have deserved it. Although they could appear to be virtuous when alive, there must have been some hidden evildoings to justify their death afterwards. On the other hand, those who could live on must also have deserved it, and they must have done significant good deeds. To be a bit farfetched, distorted argumentation like these really harms people’s mind and morality. This is why I abhor the idea of retribution. (1936b: 217)
In analyzing the faulty logic behind the story, Zhou emphasizes the need for clearer thinking among the Confucian literati and the fact that they also betrayed Confucius’s dictum to avoid discussion of the supernatural; they are, he says, no different from the blind followers of the White Lotus Cult (*Bailian jiao*). The idea of retribution was neither scientifically valid nor morally beneficial in cultivating human emotions; it served to sustain the conventional moral order by terrifying people into submission. Zhou summarizes with the following attack on the idea of retribution:

“The favorite books of traditional Chinese are within three types: erotic writings, writings about neo-Confucianism, and writings about retribution. Erotic writings are acceptable as long as they are not vulgar and ugly. Neo-Confucianism is a valuable philosophy as long as it does not become insincere and pretentious. Only the writings about retribution are worthless” (1937b: 649). Occupied with such popular beliefs, literati could not create a rationalist culture of their own, not to mention enlighten the people. Although evolutionism pointed to some hope for future change, Zhou’s theory of heredity squashed that hope (1945a: 620).

As already mentioned, Zhou’s criticism of the Confucian literati was an indirect way for him to reflect on the roles of modern intellectuals, who, including the proponents of enlightenment, were mere reincarnations of these “old ghosts.” Modern intellectuals shared with their predecessors an irrational way of thinking and an enthusiasm for folk beliefs; the only difference between the literati and modern intellectuals lay in the content of their beliefs. For the latter, enlightenment itself had become a new belief system, one that served the ideology of progress. In Zhou’s view, the new beliefs of enlightenment, national salvation, and the communist revolution were as irrational, oppressive, and violent as the old ones. Modern intellectuals therefore had to be self-reflexive; they could not regard themselves as representatives of any absolute truth with the right to violently eliminate the ghosts of the past, because those ghosts could possess the “new” intellectuals at the very moment they resort to
Zhou’s proposal *xin de qimeng yundong* is not associated with the “New Enlightenment Movement” (*Xin qimeng yundong*) during late 1930s and early 1940s, which sought to popularize Marxism.

irrationality and to radical and violent approaches. To Zhou’s dismay, that was exactly what happened in the new “era of belief.”

**A “New Enlightenment”: Disenchantment through Rational and Aesthetic Transformation**

Zhou regarded himself as the only rationalist to resist the fanatic trends of his time. In reflecting on these trends, he developed his own approach, with which he endeavored to disseminate knowledge, to rationalize old beliefs through sympathetic understanding, to appropriate religious rites in practice, and to purge the fear and terror in beliefs with aesthetic methods. These are the core elements of his proposed “new enlightenment movement” (*xin de qimeng yundong*) of the 1930s, which he promoted through public media: “At a time of limited freedom of speech, it is better for newspapers to put aside their business in commenting on political issues and reporting current affairs. They can befriend ordinary people and provide them with common knowledge” (1935a: 615). Such practices might not be able to save the nation, but they were necessary to help individuals better understand themselves and emancipate themselves from the curse of beliefs. Receiving little public attention, Zhou’s new enlightenment remained an individual endeavor and never developed into a “movement” (Ji 2010: 28).

Zhou’s framework for the “new enlightenment” started with a rationalization of the religious and superstitious. He relied on his understanding of the Darwinian concept of “the will of survival” to interpret all human activities, be they secular or religious, basic or advanced, material or spiritual:

*Human activities are the manifestation of the will of survival. Therefore, there is no practical way to fully renounce this world. Human activities, such as worshipping snakes and tortoises, cultivating the body in Daoist religion, pursuing eternal life in Christianity and in Buddhist Nirvana, and the ideological and*
political efforts to build a paradise in this filthy secular world, all are manifestations of such will. The difference among these activities lies only in the approaches they take. It is difficult to tell which approach is material and which is spiritual. It seems that the desire for life manifested in Buddhism is much more extravagant than that in Christianity; in Christianity, it is stronger than that in Communism; and in Communism, it is stronger than that in secular politics. Nevertheless, this comparison should not suggest a hierarchy of “spiritual civilization.” (1928b: 475)

At a time when it was growing as a political movement in China, Zhou paid particular attention to communism. To him, communism is neither a “scientific” social movement nor a manifestation of evil; rather, it is simply a secular movement with strong religiosity. Other religious practices are not irrelevant to the secular world either. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that regards religious activities as a denial of life and an annihilation of the secular world, Zhou thought that religious and secular practices are essentially rooted in the same driving force. He even believed that the more religious an activity is, the stronger “the will of survival” it expresses. Worldly causes lay beneath the pursuit of the transcendental, and what differentiated religious activities from secular ones were the particular measures they took, not their nature. With such a theory, it became convenient for Zhou to include seemingly irrational cultural phenomena in the secular and rationalist world order.

Zhou reinterpreted sacred texts as books of philosophy, history, and literature. He read the Bible as a book of humanism and nihilism; on Genesis, for example, he writes that the myth of creation “has been regarded as divine doctrine and historical facts. This view is of course criticizable, but we can investigate the thought and emotion expressed in the tale if we are aware of its status as an old tale” (1921a: 414-415). In the wake of the May Fourth denunciation of Confucianism and during the rise of the iconoclastic left, Zhou insisted on incorporating the Confucian canon into a modern education: it still could be read in modern times “as an ordinary book, 23 For examples of his discussion of the Bible from literary and philosophical perspectives, see Zhou 1920, 1921a, and 1929b.
and could be a reference for young readers who have already acquired common knowledge. It is unnecessary to regard it as sacred, for there is no sacred book under the sun” (1934e: 14–15). His approach was starkly different from that of Lu Xun, who once suggested that young readers should refuse to read Chinese classics, because they could compromise their will to action (1925: 12–13). Zhou regarded such overpoliticized statements as exaggerated and insincere (1966: 336). Although he rejected Buddhist philosophy as incomprehensible, he highlighted the “Buddhist spirit,” which entailed a generous, compassionate, and dignified attitude toward humanity, and the willingness to sacrifice (1944d: 237–238). Zhou’s attitude toward traditional religion and philosophy was one of inclusion and transformation; he believed that modern readers should not be told by an external authority what to read because they were mature enough to determine with a rational attitude the true nature of a text.

Zhou was concerned about the vanishing of traditional celebrations in the face of modernization. In 1932, he discussed the significance of the Spring Festival, which was officially abandoned in 1928 along with the lunar calendar.24 Although he recognized that it incorporated some “backward” religious elements, the festival could not be dismissed as trivial, a point he reinforces by citing Jane Ellen Harrison: “The religious impulse is directed to one end and one only, the conservation and promotion of life. This end is met in two ways, one negative, by the riddance of whatever is hostile, one positive, by the impulsion of whatever is favorable to life. All over the world, there are two kinds of religious rites which consist of expulsion and impulsion” (Harrison 1924: xii; Zhou 1932: 47). The Spring Festival provided an opportunity for people to ease the tensions in their tedious everyday lives, and therefore should be preserved in modern times to make life more tolerable. As Susan Daruvala (2000) and Charles Laughlin (2008) have argued, Zhou’s functionalist interpretation (mostly inspired by Harrison) blurs the line between tradition and modernity.

Zhou explored the genesis of beliefs and superstitions from a

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24 For the KMT government's proposals and policies on banning the lunar calendar and the traditional celebrations from 1928 to 1930, see Second Historical Archives of China 1994: 424–436.
psychological perspective, writing, “It is said that there is no god in heaven or beneath the ground. All that exists is but the projected shadow of the worshipers’ feeling” (1937a: 530). In 1940, Zhou discussed the magic ceremony hua shuixian (seeking help from the water fairy), which sailors used in extremely dangerous situations at sea; the rite entailed mimicking paddling with chopsticks, praying, and chanting incantations. “Reading such stories,” he writes, “often makes me feel sad. When the situation is beyond the control of human power, people have to resort to the supernatural. They use prayer and incantations. The eagerness for survival expressed in the rites is indeed lamentable” (1940: 305). Here praying and chanting were used as ways for dealing with life-and-death situations, when no practical measures were left, and thus should not be condemned. Although his views might be reductionist, Zhou rationalizes these rites as reflections of the human psyche. In the process, religious activities are desacralized and demystified, rendered transparent under a rational gaze.

Zhou’s essay “The Message from the Eternal Mother” provides a concentrated example of the various ways in which he reinterpreted and transformed folk beliefs with a rational understanding. Written in 1945, the essay discusses the Red Sun Cult (Hongyang jiao), which has a complex history and various branches with a mix of doctrines borrowed from Buddhism, Daoism, and other folk beliefs.25 The cult worships the Eternal Mother (Wusheng laomu). Living in the eternal home, she misses her daughters and sons suffering in the dusty world, and sends messengers to call them home before the world is eventually destroyed by a devastating calamity.26 In the essay, Zhou first confidently declares that as a person of “little faith” (xiaoxin), he refused to join any cult; still, he was able to understand and sympathize with the psychological and psychoanalytical drive of the cult’s adherents (1945b: 545). Based on his earlier translation of Jane Ellen Harrison (Harrison 1924: 64; Zhou 1927a: 24), he draws an analogy between the cult and the Greek worship of the Mother and argues that the worship was a universal human belief, although it involved a

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25 The cult is also called Hunyuan Jiao or Hongyang Jiao. It was popular during the late Ming to mid-Qing period in northern China and was constantly suppressed by the government.

26 For more information about the cult, see Song Jun 2002 and Seiwert 2003.
significant variety of magical and mysterious factors. Zhou elaborates his understanding in Freudian psychoanalytical fashion: "Objectively speaking, the Mother is always a mysterious figure. In their minds, people pursue their Mother's love and unconsciously regret being separated from their Mother at an early age, and have an instinctive desire to return to the embrace of their Mother" (1945b: 549). The cult, therefore, was an expression of universal human psychic desires.

After analyzing the psychological/psychoanalytical aspects of the cult, Zhou turned to its literary aspects in its scriptures, arguing that it was the affective power of the scriptures that helped popularize the cult. Mixed with singing and recitation, the scriptures were written in the oral-related literary form of baojuan (precious scrolls), which was originally used to promote Buddhism and later became popular among many local cults. Among believers, these baojuan even acquired the same status as the Buddhist sutras. Zhou excerpted several passages to demonstrate how emotionally touching these scriptures could become:

The Eternal Mother is longing for her sons and grandsons. / She is trying to send you messages.

She sends out the messages time and time again, / but you never want to return to your heart and seek the Origin.

At home, the Eternal Mother sheds tears upon thinking of her children. / She asks you to go home. / Stop indulging in insatiable desires in the sea of bitterness, / return to the Pure Land and go to the Soul Mountain, / and come sit on the Golden Lotus with the Mother.

Sitting under the sun, the Mother is sailing the dharma boat. / She ferries her daughters and sons who lost their way home, / to meet their destiny and return to the Origin. / I persuade you all to start chanting the name of Buddha quickly. / Cultivate yourself and make progress.
The Eternal Mother has long been awaiting her sons and grandsons at the Longhua assembly. She calls her sons, calls her daughters with tears in her eyes. She is calling eagerly, but who is willing to answer back? (1945b: 549)

Zhou points out that although unrefined in style, the text was “straightforward and powerful.” The “I” narrator speaks directly to the audience (“you”), not to provide a rationale or apology for the belief but to perform the role of messenger and invite the audience to feel the need to reestablish their lost connection with the Mother. What message, then, was the narrator trying to send? Zhou regards it as a Messianic message, which offers redemption to the suffering masses.

Members of the higher-class might feel the cult to be ridiculous. For the ordinary toiling masses who see no way out, however, it is like the situation when Avvakum’s wife asks on their way being exiled to Siberia, “How long, my master, will these tortures last?” Under such circumstances, what a relief it would be if they suddenly hear such a Messianic message! (1945b: 550)

Here the reference to Avvakum and Messianism was undoubtedly meant to highlight a universal aspect of the cult by situating it in the context of world religion. Zhou emphasizes that the desire for salvation derives from the suffering of individuals. When there is no way out in reality, “the will of survival” changes course to find an expression in the transcendental.

In the baojuan text Zhou cited above, the Eternal Mother is portrayed not as an emotionally detached goddess but as a Mother figure who cares about her suffering sons and daughters. She not only represents the transcendental origin, but also satisfies the public’s imagination of filiality. In addition, the power of the message not only works on a rational level but also stirs the emotions, which Zhou describes in this way: “It is not only about the fact that they are the children of the Eternal Mother. When they realize that their Mother is expecting them and calling them with tears in
Nevertheless, Zhou's sympathy for the cult did not go beyond the domain of the psychological and the emotional: he rejected it as a religious practice, and also rejected its often unintelligible doctrines and shamanistic rites (1945b: 551–552).

Emphasizing the power of human pathos, Zhou singles out “tear” as a key word: what attracts the believers first might be the tears of the Mother, not any doctrines. Joining the cult becomes a kind of family reunion. The cult is thus rooted in universal human experiences and sentiments, and there is nothing evil or mysterious about it.29

Zhou also explored death-related beliefs in terms of “the will of survival.” Death, particularly unnatural death, as part of everyday experience, is a recurring theme in Zhou's writing. Unlike Lu Xun, who tended to express anger at unjust deaths, such as those of his student Liu Hezhen and the “five martyrs” of the League of Leftwing Writers, Zhou accepted untimely death as part of humanity's competition for survival. Death-related beliefs and superstitions, including belief in ghosts and the afterlife, were not merely an object of knowledge for Zhou but a way to constitute the knowing subject.

In his view, death epitomized a fundamental “split between the emotional and the rational,” which he regarded as the saddest aspect of modern life and which reflected a larger irresolvable conflict between the scientific, the rational, and the materialistic, on the one hand, and the emotional and the sentimental, on the other hand (1925c: 181). For modern people, the aura of the otherworldly had faded away, and what remained were cold reality and hard “facts.” In such a world, mourning and remembering are still needed. Zhou wrote when one of his students died of illness: “To mourn the dead does not necessarily mean to experience the agony and sorrow about the death of the person. It is more for our reminiscence, for us to lament the transience of life. No matter how materialistic or pessimistic a person can be, this sorrow is not easy to get rid of” (1925c: 180). The unbearable sadness surrounding death, therefore, legitimizes the desire to extend life beyond the limits of the physical world. Life after death had to be imagined to fill the void created by death.
Imagining life after death “not only eliminated the terror of death, but nurtured human emotional attachments to the dead. People always project their unfulfilled desires onto rites and myth, just as they express them in their dreams” (1925c: 181). The afterlife thus reflected a layer of the reality in which we live, and religious or superstitious ways of dealing with death provided channels for the expression of human emotions.

In this regard, Zhou departed from hardcore materialism, which tended to reduce life to physical and physiological phenomena. Having experienced the loss of a child himself, Zhou paid particular attention to the ways in which young children’s deaths were imagined in folktales. In his discussion of these folktales, he observes that dead children are often summoned to serve the Heavenly Emperor, reincarnated after wandering as “homeless” ghosts, or become fairy ladies (1925c: 181; 1928a: 509; 1934c: 288–289; 1937c: 543–550). These tales functioned as anesthesia for the parents to dull their unbearable pain: “These stories might sound ridiculous, but they are the very manifestation of the true beauty of human emotions. We are aware that such beliefs are superstitious, but . . . there are inherent factors of beauty and moral good in them. If the parents believed that there are ways to reunite with the dead, what a consolation it could be?” (1925c: 181).

Through the lens of his modern rationalist thinking, the ridiculous and the superstitious were transformed into legitimate expressions of human emotions, which otherwise would never be fully articulated. Zhou argued that “the belief in the existence of ghosts is the opium for a life filled with misery and works as the last consolation for people’s strongest sadness and terror” (1934c: 288–289). The opium metaphor reminds us of Marx’s famous definition of religion as “the opium of the people” (1843: 171), but whereas Marx’s theory implies a revolutionary action to transform the conditions that gave rise to such an addiction, Zhou demonstrated a sympathetic understanding of religion as a kind of necessary painkiller. He even lamented the disappearance of “backward” beliefs with the rise of materialist and scientific thinking in the modern world. People in
the modern world may have lost faith in transmigration, reincarnation, and other forms of “opium,” but they suffered more for it because they no longer had any form of spiritual and psychological mediation for the traumatic events of life.

Performing religious funeral rites, even without necessarily identifying with their underlying beliefs, could also bridge the divide between the emotional and the rational. Having experienced the death of strangers, students, and family members, Zhou was driven to seek appropriate methods of emotional expression. In 1921, while he was staying in the Western Mountains outside Beijing to recover from an illness, a guest at his hotel died. After his death, the hotel assistant tore off the page of the account book with his bill on it and burned it with some spirit money, and other guests also burned spirit money to mourn him. After learning about this small mourning ritual, Zhou thought that he lost the courage to laugh at “superstitious” activities (1921d: 392), and antisuperstition ideology seemed to him less important than the sympathy people expressed for the anonymous, lonely traveler who died far away from home; old “superstitious” rites were a form of humane action. In 1929, when his daughter Zhou Ruozi died, he felt unbearable sadness. As a materialist, he of course did not believe in an afterlife, but he could not face her death without emotional attachment (1929a: 582–583), and he invited monks to chant Buddhist sutras on the anniversary of her death (1930d: 101). When his mother died in 1943, he also “followed the custom” of using Buddhist funeral rites to feed the hungry ghosts (1943a: 667). These ritual practices seem insignificant against the larger social context, within which death could be either easily ignored or advocated as a grand sacrifice for a transcendent purpose; nevertheless, they are symbols of Zhou’s rationalization of traditions. As he wrote in 1945, “according to the principles of the material world, the spirit perishes with the body. Taking human emotions into consideration, however, one can assume that the dead still exist during the memorial ceremony” (1945a: 616). Such an
“assumption” did not alter the objective truth of death, yet it did transform the old rites into pure forms of human emotion.

Zhou insisted that to accomplish this transformation of beliefs and superstitions, the terror and fear embodied in them should be exorcised through art. He observed that all belief-related texts were still dominated with fear and terror without being transformed into any artistic works (1921: 444). On a personal level, he discussed the influence on him of stories in *Strange Tales of Liaozihai* (Liaozhai zhiyi) and *Random Notes from Night Talks* (Yetan suilu): “Their writing style is acceptable, but some of the stories still make me afraid today. I do not believe in the existence of ghosts and monsters, but I always feel a chill when I’m in the dark, and this is a result of the negative impression they left on my mind” (1934g: 290). Such terror caused permanent damage to his mind (1936d: 281). To him the ghosts, gods, and deities in Chinese culture were less human-friendly than those in other cultural traditions, as could be seen in the different representations of the thunder god in Japan and China. Whereas the Japanese treated the thunder god with humor, in China, tales about gods of thunder, fire, water, and wind were full of terror. To Zhou, this was a symptom of an unhealthy mentality (1936b: 221–222), and it was necessary to eliminate these elements of terror from Chinese culture to make it healthy.

Greek mythology was Zhou’s model for China. In his numerous essays about and translations of Greek mythology, he concentrated on a central idea: the purgation of fear and the transformation of religion into art. As he cited from Harrison:

The remarkable thing is that the Greeks could not tolerate in their mythology the ugliness of the Gorgon. They turned the head of Medusa into the head of a lovely sorrow-stricken woman. In like fashion they could not tolerate the Gorgon form of the Earth-Mother. It was the mission of the Greek artist and the Greek poet to cleanse religion from fear. This is the greatest of debts that we owe to the Greek myth-maker. (Harrison 1924: 71–72; Zhou 1927a: 29)
Clearly, the “ugliness” refers to inhumane and horrible elements. For Harrison, it was through artistic transformations that the humanist foundation of modern Western civilization was constituted. She explains how the Greeks accomplished such a transformation with the same religious materials common to other nations:

What is characteristic of the Greeks is not the material, but their handling of it. Among the Greeks, religious imaginations and religious acts, though never perhaps without their influence on conduct, tend to become the impulse of two quite other forms of human activity—forms, both of which are often, though wrongly, regarded as alien to religion. These two forms are art, both literary and plastic, and philosophy. By the action of art and philosophy savage elements are eliminated, and, by this purgation from ignorance, ugliness and fear, religion became, not only powerless to harm, but potent exceedingly for good. (Harrison 1921: 12–13; Zhou 1934h: 239)

Zhou agrees with Harrison that art and philosophy are the most important devices used in the purgation of ugliness and the inhumane. He proposes that modern intellectuals evaluate the various forms of beliefs and superstitions and help transform them into artistic forms. Nevertheless, his proposal fell on deaf ears in the context of the national salvation project of the 1930s and 1940s and was little more than a monologue.

Throughout his life, Zhou rejected violent and radical attacks on old beliefs and sought instead ways to bridge the old and the new through a transformation of the old. As he summarized in 1945, he preferred a profound understanding of religious beliefs and superstitions to hasty reform (1945a: 616). In other words, he did not expect to transform social beliefs with his atheist philosophy; rather, he explored the ultimate causes of these phenomena, the roles they played in human life, and the ways in which they reflected and fostered human emotions. Therefore, the “new enlightenment movement” he practiced in the 1930s and the 1940s
was more an epistemological and psychological transformation (how we interpret and perceive the world) than a political action (how we change the world). Such a transformation took the form not of violent social movements, but of gradual dissemination of common knowledge among the public and of displacing the terror and ugliness with artistic interpretations of popular beliefs. As such, time-honored customs and beliefs might be preserved and become part of modern life.

Conclusion: Chasing the Wind in a Meaningless World

Zhou viewed the May Fourth, the leftist movement, and national salvation as fundamentally problematic because they lacked a self-reflexive dimension that could prevent the new belief system from violently replacing the hegemony of the old. He pessimistically pointed out that even though progress was theoretically possible, what was in fact happening was that the “new” turned out to be a reincarnation of the “old”; it was necessary, therefore, to return to the old and understand it more fully. Although Zhou’s critiques in the 1920s were still more or less consistent with the enlightenment project of the day, his personal “new enlightenment movement” of the 1930s and 1940s was at odds with mainstream intellectual trends, and Zhou became something of an intellectual outcast.31

While others discoursed on class struggle and national salvation, Zhou saw the examination of “the arrogance and ignorance of fellow citizens, and thinking about individuals’ aging, dying, sickness and suffering” as a great enterprise. This endeavor may have been a fruitless one in a meaningless world, like chasing the wind, but for Zhou, not having to worry about ultimate outcomes made the process more enjoyable (1929b: 568).

Zhou did not make any original contributions in biology, cultural anthropology, or sex psychology, but he used these disciplines to forge a new rationalist attitude, the goal of which was the emancipation of people’s thoughts, not a sociopolitical revolution. Concentrating on the improvement of an individual’s situation (acquiring knowledge to cultivate

31 Zhou himself was partially responsible for this result because of the difficulty and obscurity of his texts. A case in point is the debate around his poems written for his fiftieth birthday in 1934. In the poems, Zhou portrays himself as a Confucian scholar reincarnated from a Buddhist monk who enjoyed various leisure activities. Lu Xun was still able to understand the sarcastic implications in the allusive poems, but some younger leftist critics, such as Hu Feng, Liao Mosha, and Chen Zizhan, failed to grasp their subtlety and criticized Zhou harshly (Lin Fenfen 2010). Therefore, it might be argued that Zhou’s success in invoking traditional aesthetic categories to create his unique literary style, along with his self-claimed and widely accepted public image as “hermit,” brought about the failure of the dissemination of his enlightenment ideas.

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a rational attitude, cultivating refined taste in everyday life, etc.), he refused to periodize history according to political events in a teleological fashion. To Zhou, history was a process of change from the era of the collective and institutional to the era of the individual, from the dominance of belief to the rule of reason based on scientific knowledge. The grand projects were meaningful only when they could contribute to the emancipation of the individual; enlightenment was a precondition for the grand projects. But because enlightenment was a long-term, peaceful, and natural process of self-illumination through modern education and journalism, the grand projects would always be deferred.

As Vera Schwarcz (1986: 301) points out, the history of the Chinese enlightenment is not finished. Zhou once regarded himself as having been born too late (in the nineteenth instead of the eighteenth century), but one could also say that he was born too early: the kinds of intellectual discourses he initiated in China did not receive significant academic attention until the 1980s. After years of wars, famine, and revolution, enlightenment returned to capture the imagination of Chinese intellectuals. Today, debates on the May Fourth enlightenment and the whole Chinese modernization project continue. For some scholars, the May Fourth enlightenment was a model to be resurrected in the wake of Mao-era fanaticism; others, such as Yu-sheng Lin (1978), David Wang (1997, 2004), and Kai-wing Chow et al. (2008), have fundamentally questioned the May Fourth paradigm. Using Kant’s definition of enlightenment and parsing the etymology of the Chinese term for the enlightenment, qimeng, Deng Xiaomang (2006: 130) criticizes the proponents of the May Fourth and the new enlightenment movement in the 1980s for their condescending attitude toward the public. Jiang Yihua (2000) even names the Chinese enlightenment as “enlightenment without reason.” Zhou Zuoren constructed a mosaic of knowledge for understanding the human world, but was unable to work out an agenda for action. As he admitted, with his rational way of thinking, he lacked enthusiasm for action (1944e: 240). From a practical perspective, many activists still regard
the May Fourth as the source of their various enlightenment projects in the 1980s and 1990s, and have proposed “returning to the May Fourth” as a mode of resistance to the totalitarian political order (Li Shenzhi 2001: 37). But which “May Fourth” to return to, and how? The enlightenment Zhou proposed derives from the European Enlightenment, which has been accused of leading to many of the catastrophes of modern history (Schmidt 1996: 1). If Zhou’s mode of enlightenment had succeeded in China, would it face the same sort of accusations?
Glossary

- aizhi zhe: 爱智者
- Bailian jiao: 白莲教
- baojuan: 寶卷
- biji: 筆記
- Cai Yuanpei: 蔡元培
- changshi: 常識
- Chen Duxiu: 陳獨秀
- Chicai shimo: 吃菜事魔
- danchun de xinyang: 單純的信仰
- fanren: 凡人
- fashi: 法施
- Fei Jidujiao xuesheng tongmeng: 非基督教學生同盟
- Fei zongjiao datongmeng: 非宗教大同盟
- fenghua: 風化
- fuzhou: 符咒
- Gongguo ge: 功過格
- gugui chonglai: 故鬼重來
- guocui: 國粹
- He guan zi: 誖冠子
- Hongyang jiao: 紅陽教
- hua shuixian: 劫水仙
- Jueshi zhenjing: 覺世真經
- lijiao: 親教
- Liaozhai zhiyi: 聊齋誌異
- Longhua hui: 龍華會
- Lu Xun: 魯迅
- Lunheng: 論衡
- Ma Yuzao: 马裕藻
- manxing de yiliu: 魏性的遊留
- Qian Xuantong: 錣玄同
- qimeng: 問蒙
- quwei: 趣味
- renqing wuli: 人情物理
- renxue: 人學
- Sai xiansheng: 賽先生
- sanwen: 散文
- Shen Jianshi: 沈兼士
- Shen Shiyuan: 沈士遠
- Shijie Jidujiao xuesheng tongmeng shiyuan: 世界基督教學生同盟 誓願
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