

# LIANG SHUMING'S VIEWPOINT OF CULTURAL PATTERNS

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## ABSTRACT

One hundred years ago, in his book *The Oriental and Western Cultures and Their Philosophy* published in 1921, Liang Shuming made a comparison between the western, Chinese, and Indian cultures and offered his prediction of the culture of the world. In 2015, When Professor Guy Salvatore Alitto was interviewed he said he believed Liang's thoughts will continue to play a significant role during the next one hundred years. Like what Professor Alitto has put it, in this day and age Liang's thoughts are still shining onto reality. The present study argues that in making the comparison and the prediction Liang also expounded his unique viewpoint of cultural patterns based on a psychological intention analysis: the western culture centers on the intention of pushing forward, making it a pattern driven into an impasse; Chinese culture centers on the intention of negotiating according to the golden mean, making it an ideal pattern for the world in the near future; Indian culture centers on the intention of reflecting and drawing-back, making it a pattern that will be an ultimate choice for the world in the far future.

**Keywords:** Liang Shuming, cultural patterns, psychological intention

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This study had been conducted at both Nanjing University in China and the University of Wisconsin, Madison in the US by the author. It had also been accepted by the American Oriental Society Annual Meeting in 2019 and had been presented in Chicago. The author reports here that there are no competing interests to declare.

## I. LIANG SHUMING: THE WAY OF RULERS, KINGS, AND BUDDHA

Liang Shuming argued that there were many different ways of dealing with problems in daily life, and those ways, or those lifestyles, can be categorized into three types: (1) striving for whatever is demanded; (2) ready to reconcile to the situation and seek for a self-content and expediency instead of a solution; (3) intending to radically cancel whatever questions are encountered. In short, they are demanding forward, negotiating with one's own intention, and demanding backward respectively. Therefore, in terms of that "culture is the life of one nation, and life is the will that is yet to be fulfilled", he defined the western culture as one with a pushing-forward intention and argued that this intention produced science and democracy, which were two enlightening characteristics of the western culture, described Chinese culture as one with an intention of negotiating, and pointed out that it was the sage, Confucius who led us onto this path; and characterized Indian culture as one with a drawing-back intention.

Liang also pointed out that, to demonstrate the basic intention of the western culture, we only have to examine its three characteristics and with only one glance, we can see it is proceeding on this first path, that is, to push forward forever. Conquest of nature, science, and democracy are all the embodiment of this spirit. Since ancient Greece, the Western had taken this first path and gained great achievements. Then in ancient Rome, there was great chaos and with the help of Christian which were borrowed from Hebrew regions, they gathered up and marched into the medieval time, which brewed the Renaissance. Up to the Renaissance, they turned their faces, which had been raised towards heaven, back to the secular world. Meanwhile, the Reformation transformed religion into a good helper for the western culture to hold onto this first path, and after that, it never tried to turn to the third path, the path of drawing back represented by India.

He thinks that during the time of ancient Greece important and serious studies had been comprehensive enough to include both nature and humans as their objects, but later the West remained only an outward tendency in their inquires because they took up the first path which turned their philosophy into materialism-oriented and for them, the concept of "material" was prior to its articulation. Greek invented geometry as their most long-lasting study and its method of a priori deduction seems to be applicable to the universe. Therefore Greek philosophers began to view reasoning as omnipotent. When it came to Socrates, he

advocated that "knowledge is virtue" so knowledge is the most important, which was the beginning of the first path followed by the West. After Socrates they divided into four schools: Cryenaie, emphasizing happiness; Plato and Aristotle, upholding "the idea of good" and stressing knowledge and will; Stoics, practicing reclusiveness; Epicurus, pursuing hedonism. When it came to Christine ethics, indiscriminate love was advocated. Around the time of the Renaissance and after it, there were utilitarianism, eudemonism, hedonism and soon, first with Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke, and Hume as their representatives, and then represented by Bentham, Muller and Spencer. In the following centuries, several philosophers such as Descartes still studied metaphysics and they were continental rationalists. Kant and Fichte from Germany argued for the role of morality as our obligations. Hegel believed that there should be an objective standard for morality.

To sum up, based on the intention of "pushing forward", be it conquering nature, developing science, or any other rational activities prevailing in recent centuries, the Western culture demonstrates the feature of carrying out the Way of Rulers.

For Chinese culture, Liang Shuming pointed out that, it lagged far behind in terms of the conquest of nature, science, and democracy. He said he could predict with certainty that if westernization had not reached China, China would have been completely insulated and would not be able to invent steamships or trains three hundred, five hundred, or even one thousand years later. He explained that it was because if two nations are on the same path and one is left behind, it will eventually catch up as long as it keeps on moving forward; but if the two are on different paths, then no matter how far China will go, it will not reach the point that had been attained by the West, because it is the second path of human life that on which Chinese culture is walking: it is a culture centering on a negotiating intention and golden mean. Drastically unlike the Western culture, Liang argues, Chinese culture takes The Book of Change as its metaphysical core, which makes it distinct from both the Western and Indian cultures.<sup>1</sup> The intention of this metaphysical core is to negotiate or mediate: there is no such thing that is absolute, monolithic, radical, unilateral, or uncompromising. If there are, they must have remained invisible. Anything that appears is relative, binary, moderate, multilateral, and harmonious, and no being can be an exception to that.

<sup>1</sup> Liang pointed out that Zhang Taiyan had been completely wrong in drawing a parallel between Cittamatra in Buddhism and The Book of Change or Zhuangzi. He was wrong primarily in assuming that human cultures were more or less similar.

Confucius' philosophy of life was born from this metaphysics.<sup>2</sup> Confucius praised *growing*, and believed everything shall grow lively and sprightly along with the flow of nature. He thought the universe was always growing forward. For anything on earth that wants to grow, let it grow. Without any external things, it can grow into an agreement with the universe and fill the whole universe with life and vitality.<sup>3</sup> Confucius maintains an unconfirmed attitude. After confirmation and calculation, people will lose the golden mean and lean outward. Therefore they float above two forces that are opposite to each and remain rootless and unconfirmed. One confirmation is one uncompromising, but all confirmations are established on compromising. Therefore, anything is both compromising and uncompromising, without confirming, its appearance as is shown on the surface is its content. Whatever is wrong is wrong because it confirms external appearance and falls into extreme firmness. Reality resembles a ball and if you hold on to one point and try to infer with reasons, you only, get a line not a ball. The result will be an impasse. Common people always have many proposals while Confucius has neither assertions nor proposals. Therefore he does not have a regular teacher and he passes on ancient culture without adding anything new to it. If we do not hold onto anything and have no proposals, then what shall we do?

Confucius advocates the use of intuitions and responding to feelings. Human life is a flow of entity and it will naturally go along the most appropriate way. To respond to things with feelings and reactions. That is change. Naturally, this change has to be moderate and compromising. Therefore none of its reactions is not the most appropriate. That is what we called nature is to follow the order of heaven and Dao is to follow the order of nature, which is also what Mencius called good conscience known without consideration, good abilities acquired without learning. Therefore to brighten *Ren* is to sharpen intuitions because wickedness was often due to the insensitiveness of intuitions. Secular men's and women's intuitional feelings and desires are out of the natural flow. If their feelings and desires follow nature and be moderate then they will be brimming over with vigour and vitality. What should be watched out for is to distinguish between the material world and the mind with reasons, and to observe and calculate. That will lead to the retreat of intuitions and the failure of *Ren*.

2 According to Liang Shuming, that is what all Confucius had said is about, "One principle runs through it all", and Hu shizhi might make a mistake here in perceiving it as an epistemology, because Chinese people were not interested in static knowledge and what's more, Confucianism prefers intuition and seldom speaks of reason.

3 Liang argued that from this we could see that it did not make any sense in thinking that Confucianism and Buddhism share the same line of derivation after their origin, because Buddhism views everything's growth as *vitatha*, as what Wu Jianzhai has put, what Buddhism advocates is just what Confucianism denounces.

It is probably because reason is a tool for people to calculate, and calculation begins with for-oneself. Therefore, although the reason is unselfish and static, it always comes with possessive instinct, which makes it rejected by Confucianism for that it suppresses feelings and entails selfishness. Liang Shuming also holds that *Ren* means not only the feeling of love but also a state that is very vigorous yet very steady. It requires two compulsory conditions: stillness, which is existing quietly and growing steadily<sup>4</sup>; sensibility, which is being sensitive and strong.

The thoughts of Confucianism were represented by binary, compromising, moderate and golden mean. They are concerned with inner peace, intuitions, and golden mean in natural flows, which are going inward. Meanwhile, they also give considerations to the outside, reason, moderation in choices, which are the combination of going inward to drawing back and going forward. Therefore, Liang Shuming thought that for Confucius the happiness of life is not a relative happiness but an independent happiness: growing lively and flowing exuberantly. He argued that according to Confucius, children shall only be cultivated with some instinct of filial piety and fraternal duty. After that there is no more rules that should be taught about society, the world and human, and naturally there will be nothing bad about him. It is because humans are originally guided by intuitions and if he is not brought up with a kind of essential instinct impulses, it will not only be no good but also harmful. Confucius believes that the only prescriptions with miraculous effects that can work on instinct feelings are rites and music. Rites and music are especially workable for feelings and they work on our real life from intuition.

All those aspects mentioned above, from for anything on earth that wants to grow, let it grow, next to unconfirmed so as not to lean outward, then to respond to feelings and stillness for *Ren*, and finally to from inside to outside and the combination of going forward and drawing back, none of them does not signify the Way of Kings.

Unlike the Western Way of Rulers and Chinese Way of Kings, Indian culture centres on the Way of Buddha. Liang Shuming thinks India had achieved almost nothing in terms of material culture, stopped evolution in terms of social life, and only developed its religion in great prosperity, which produced the abnormally flourishing spiritual life. And among all aspects of spiritual life it is religion that enjoyed an abnormal prosperity. Its culture nourished

4 Liang pointed out that this stillness had nothing to do with those Indian thoughts. It merely means that when the mind is in chaos the intuition will be blunt because sharp intuition can only be obtained in tranquillity. He added that When people loved practicing sitting in stillness in the Song and Ming dynasties, it is not, as many believed, because they were influenced by the Buddhism and Laozi, and instead, it is the original thinking of Confucianism. Liang said we had do them wrong in believing so.

religious stories such as starving oneself to death, plunging into a cold pool, burning oneself to death, stripping oneself naked, behaving like cattle and dogs, and so on. Liang recounted the stories explaining why people in this culture converted themselves to religion: when the Heir was going on a tour and saw farm cattle that were used to plough, worms that were dug out by the plough, and birds that feed on the worms, he realized all living creatures in this world are causing death to each other; when he encountered old age, illness, and death at the eastern, southern and western gate of the town, he realized the impermanence of all creatures. Liang pointed out that what was called the pain of old age, illness and death in Indian culture is not the pain of old age, illness and death itself. No doubt they are painful, but in Indian culture it refers to the pain of the old age that once was young age, of the illness that once was prosperous, and of the death that once was alive. What is painful is once-was, also called impermanence. Therefore Indian people never demand happiness as Western people do, nor do they try to be content with themselves like Chinese people do. They are trying to transcend this life in a way that is neither to push forward nor to negotiate, but to draw back, longing for jumping out of the impermanence and attaining the Way of Buddha.

## II. LIANG SHUMING'S PREDICTION OF THE FUTURE CULTURAL PATTERN FOR THE WORLD

Based on a description of the vicissitudes of facts and academic thoughts, and on a prediction of the tendencies of those vicissitudes, Liang Shuming anticipated what would be the possible cultural pattern for the world in the future. He divided the vicissitudes of facts into economic changes and social changes. Besides, he said academic thoughts include ideas (or science) and attitudes (or philosophy) and expounded the changes of ideas, or the changes of science, and the change of attitudes, or the changes of philosophy.

Liang characterized the western economy as unjustified and believed its practice certainly will lead to the extinguishing of liveliness and produce a stiff, boring, and unnatural life. He argued that if this unjustified economy remained, nothing could be done to solve this problem, and it is just socialism that comes out to ask for a reformation. It asks the individual-based and manufacture-based economy to return to society-based and consumption- and distribution-based economy.<sup>5</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s, the western countries experienced a severe economic

crisis, which is both what Marx called the manifestation of conflicts in labour relations and what Liang Shuming called the unavoidable results of absurdities in the western economy. After the economic crisis, there was the development of labour unions and theories of labour unions, the transformation from a manufacturing society to a consumption society during the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century, and with it the problems of high materialization, overconsumption, eco-crisis, consumerism, and globalization and so on. The appearances of all those phenomena testify to Liang Shuming's prediction of the tendencies of the western economy.

Liang believed that western society would follow its economic changes, and the Western economy certainly will turn to be justified and becomes society-based and distribution-based. Thus it will lead to a radical reform of human culture, from the first path to the second one, that is, from conquering nature as conducted by the West to living harmoniously with nature as practiced by the Chinese. To put it in another way, there will be a transformation from the age of problems about humans versus material to the age of problems about humans versus themselves, or to what Liang Shuming called the age of problems about "empathy".<sup>6</sup> He then predicted that among all those problems about humans versus themselves, love matters would be the biggest one and even will become the most disturbing and difficult problem for the whole society after survival issues have all been settled.<sup>7</sup> Since last century, the increasing attention that has been given to love matters and research about love just verified Liang's prediction about the social changes with this regard. He pointed out that human had been struggled with the lack of material and gradually this situation will be replaced by an age of struggling with the lack of spiritual tranquillity. For a long time humans seem to be live in an age of obtaining material and before long they will transfer to an age of enjoying material. He argued that the difficulty lies not in obtaining but in enjoying, for if there is a lack of material, one can seek for it from the outside, but if it is a lack of spiritual tranquillity, one must seek for it from the inside. And the material can be obtained by pushing forward, but if the problem is how to enjoy it, may it not be the issue that can be settled by pushing forward?<sup>8</sup> Therefore he insisted that the second path, that is, a deep concern about inner life and feelings and the exercise of intuition, would be good medicine for the West.

2011, 165-170.

<sup>6</sup> Liang explained that when I asked for consonance from others, or asked for agreement from others after I put forward an idea, here it is often the empathy that predominates the final results. See *The Oriental and Western Cultures and Their Philosophy*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2011, 58.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 170-171.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 172.

<sup>5</sup> Liang Shuming, *The Oriental and Western Cultures and Their Philosophy*. Beijing: The Commercial Press,

Liang added that if the facts changed and academic thoughts remained, then although there is a necessity for the change of culture, people may not be able to carry it out in an appropriate way. He thinks that western people are living in an age of factual changes and at the same time, their academic thoughts also change a lot, which has provided them with useful guidance for coping with factual problems to create a new culture. He analysed the changes in ideas in western psychology. He argued that the westerners had taken the aspect of consciousness as the core of their psychological ideas, oblivious of the aspect of sub-consciousness and without realizing that consciousness is only the surface and it is the hidden sub-consciousness that is the core. Since Freud reversed this idea and drew attention to sub-consciousness, according to Liang Shuming, the western culture also needs a reverse. He argued that after Socrates, western thoughts had formed their own school, which was opposite to Chinese practice. Their thoughts led to discrimination and calculation and advocated sophisticated and deliberated life. Now the appearance of this reversed psychological idea, according to Liang, is because of their recognition of humans' "social instinct", and the westerners thus leveled their visions with that of Confucius.<sup>9</sup> Being regardless of gains or losses is one of Confucius' most important attitudes.<sup>10</sup>

Liang described the changes in western attitudes or philosophy as follows: at first, there was outward and silent observation, and then there was rationalism, which later gave rise to empiricism. Thus the outward visions were turned inward after a tour outside, which he believed carried Chinese characteristics. He summarized that there were all together three steps for human culture to go: first, to take the outside world into consideration, using reasons; next, to take inner life into account, using intuition; then the thing to be studied will be the thing-in-itself, using feelings.<sup>11</sup> He pointed out that the first one was conducted by the ancient West, the second by ancient China, and the last by ancient India. These three steps will be remade in current centuries, in the near future and in the far future, respectively. According to him, the West had been seeking from outside, discarding themselves and losing their spirit. Their external life appears luxuriant while their inner life is impoverishment. Therefore, those men of insight such as Rudolf Eucken (1846-1926), Russell (1872-1970), and Kropotkin (1842-1921) had all warned of this.<sup>12</sup>

Eucken wanted to shift the emphasis on the outside back, which was interlinked with the intention of Confucius. Russell and Kropotkin also came to Confucius for a solution. Russell's theory of knowledge emphasizes "grow freely", and the only principle of Confucianism is also letting grow. Liang believed that Russell also realized that the reason why people conduct themselves badly is not that it is their nature but that their life and vitality are injured. He also claimed that what Kropotkin called unselfish love was only an instinct, which, compared with what Russell called spirit,<sup>13</sup> is more compatible with what Confucianism advocated. What's more, Kropotkin, like Mencius, agreed with the presumption of good nature in human beings and argued for anarchism in opposition to penal institutions, which makes him more insightful than Russell. In this way, Liang summarized the path of the westerners as the Way of Rulers. Chinese Confucianism has been conducting the Way of Kings. The westerners had been seeking in vain a cure from the Reformation, art, and the unity of the soul and the body. According to Liang, only their life philosophy was capable to change this attitude. Therefore, the westerners had shown in every way a tendency to transform their Way of Rulers into the Way of Kings.

By examining those economic, social, scientific, and philosophic changes in the West, Liang believed that in terms of material, society, and spirit, the future culture of the world will demonstrate the following features: in terms of production, there will be advances in increasing the pleasure of work. According to Liang, work will be directed towards artistic creation on the one hand and on the other hand, it will be diversified by Chinese tradition of genius-worship, which apparently happens to coincide with what is called craftsmanship, a popular slogan in China nowadays; in terms of social life, ruling-oriented laws will have no place in future culture and what will be prevailing is the way that originates from feelings and harmonizes the relationship between people by prioritizing love and rites. According to Liang, in the future, laws will be replaced by rites and music, which is both the traditional practice and the modern pursuit of Chinese people for a harmonious society; in terms of spiritual life, love in the future must be of the utmost importance, with marital love being taken as the deepest affection. According to him, Religions will gradually shrink themselves, which is also an accurate prediction of the current situation.

Thus, Liang claimed that the tendency of those changes in western culture had testified to the power of the Chinese way of Confucianism to improve their desperate situation.

13 In the Appendix Liang made some revisions and argued that there is something noteworthy in Russell's division of human psychology into instinct, reason and spirit. See 245-246.

9 Ibid, 172-179.

10 Ibid, 136.

11 Ibid, 89.

12 Ibid, 179-182.

He believed that the tendency of cultural changes in the world would shift from the Way of Rulers to the Way of Kings. He pointed out that for the near future, the basic attitude of the prevailing culture of the world will be to be content with what it is, which is also featured in Chinese tradition: a justified life is content and tranquil. However, he called it a temporary and transitional attitude towards the far future, and thus he put forward his theory of the reappearance of three stages for the world culture: the present prevailing of western culture is only because it can be applied to solve the problems that are currently met by humans, whereas the failure of Chinese culture and Indian culture is merely because of their inappropriateness with the time and present needs; in the near future there will be a reappearance and prevailing of Chinese culture, just as the renaissance of ancient Greek culture, because after the path on which humans try to conquer the nature comes to an end, the second path on which people have to deal with the relationship between themselves with others will be pursued and then the so called inappropriate Chinese attitude will be adopted again; Indian culture is what we called the pre-mature human culture and it takes the shortcut towards the third path without going down the first and the second one to the end, which makes it too weird to be recognized by the whole world, though in fact this Indian path is linked with an almost noble life which are affordable for few privileged people and cannot be extended to everyone.

With regard to the attitude that we should maintain, he believed that we should reject the Indian path and, at the same time, retake in a critical way the path that the Chinese have been maintaining because all of its disadvantages lie in its inappropriateness with the time: it did not conquer the nature so that it still has to suffer from natural disasters; they did not fully develop their ability to reason before they began to worship the irrational spirit so that they still have neither clear thoughts nor organized academic ideas. Adopting this attitude has completely stopped them from advancing. They can neither go back to take the first path nor go along to take the third and if there is no external force, they will remain on this path forever. The attitude that Liang maintained is what Confucius called being-strong.<sup>14</sup> Liang pointed out that it is a status of being full of vitality and strength. Both desire and being-strong are to proceed bravely, with the former having an empty inside while the latter a solid one, and the former being motivated from the outside while the latter from inside. He also argued that Chinese people have been on the path of being close to nature, which tends to prioritize

gentleness and mildness, just as Laozi has practiced, instead of being-strong, as Confucius has advocated. It is a second path that will be more appropriate.

## II. LIANG SHUMING'S VIEWPOINT OF CULTURAL PATTERNS

Based on a recount of those three cultural patterns and some predictions he made about the cultural patterns in the near and far future for the world, Liang expounded his unique viewpoint of cultural patterns. Unlike those of both Spengler (1880-1936) and Toynbee (1889-1975), this viewpoint of cultural pattern put forward by Liang is based on an analysis of the psychological intention of the western, Chinese, and Indian cultures, and it shows the traces of having adopted Freud's theory of psychic analysis.<sup>15</sup>

In his book *The Decline of the West*, Spengler (2006) put forward his basic viewpoint of cultural patterns: culture is the basic unit of history; there are various different civilizations; cultures are equally unique and valuable and each one takes itself as the centre of the world culture; culture is predetermined, in that all of them have their destined and unchangeable life spans from birth to death; civilization is the destinations of cultures. He argued that each culture has to experience: the pre-cultural period (500-900), early culture (900-1500), late culture (1500-1800), and civilization (1800-Present), and he predicted that during the period of 2000 to 2200, the western culture will collapse.

In his book *A Study of History* Toynbee (1987) distinguished four stages of human civilization: origin, growth, decline, and breakup, and discussed the reasons and mechanisms behind them in the hope that he would find a cure for its decline. He emphasizes the comparability between civilizations and believes that all civilizations are developing in parallel, though with various periods of time's development, historical facts, and values. He also takes religions as sources of life and moderators for the origin, growth, and breakup of civilizations. He deems a coverage of the entire society by those major religions as the ultimate goal and the destination of the world civilization. He believed that religion is the hero of history, and civilizations are the wheels that propel religions forward, for which his viewpoint of history was criticized though he also stressed the initiative of human beings in the development of civilizations.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Apart from Freud, Liang had also admitted in the Appendix that he cited terms from different schools of psychology.

<sup>16</sup> This has also been criticized for it is the manifestation of his historical subjectivism and his view of heroism

<sup>14</sup> Here Liang also mentioned that Chinese Confucianism and Indian Buddhism are in opposition, with one only speaking of secular life while the other only speaking of things beyond secular life.

Like Spengler, Liang also predicted the decline of the western culture and believed the western culture that is based on the intention of pushing forward had been frantically seeking a way out, for which Chinese culture that is based on the intention of negotiation might be an ideal substitute for the world in the near future whereas Indian culture that is based on the intention of drawing-back might, in turn, be an ideal substitute for the world in the far future. This viewpoint of cultural patterns is based on Liang's division of three psychological intentions in dealing with problems in daily life: striving to solve problems, being content with oneself instead of trying to solve them, and intending to cancel those problems radically.

He questioned the saying that there were objective reasons for China's failure in nourishing science and democracy and argued that this saying implied that human culture was merely the outcome of an environment obtained in a passive way, oblivious of the creative power of the will. In fact, cultures are all creations of genius and marvelous imagination by chance. He also criticized the idea that it was because there was a lack of food that natural science was developed to conquer nature. According to him, this idea was counterfactual and superficial because at the very beginning, science was developed not for the purpose of application at all and it is only later on that science was gradually required to be applicable both practically and theoretically. He believed that stressful situation was not suitable for the origin of science because if science was primarily for the purpose of application and not for knowledge itself, then the outcome could only be "handcraft", technique instead of science, as the case in China. Therefore Liang pointed out that what could increase or decrease productivity<sup>17</sup> still lay in the spirit of humans.

Liang pointed out that the range of spirit and that of consciousness are drastically different. Consciousness is very weak while spirit is very strong. Here what he termed as spirit is actually psychological intentions, which is a fundamental sub-consciousness. This echoed with his defences for the changes of ideas in western psychology: the westerners had taken consciousness as the core of their psychological ideas, oblivious of sub-consciousness and without realizing that consciousness is only the surface and it is the hidden sub-consciousness that is the core. Besides, Liang explained his ideas with an example which goes as the following. Flies have grown six feet for surviving, which is its instinct instead of consciousness, and both instinct and consciousness are striving for something better. What hinders such striving

includes not only the material world but also empathy. Here, what he examined by using the terms such as "instinct", "consciousness", and "empathy" were all within the scope of psychological study.

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history.

<sup>17</sup> Liang argued that from this we can see productivity is not what Marx has called the utmost fundamental motivation for development since there was something that can increase and decrease productivity.