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# Utilitarianism and the Westernization of Modern Mohist Studies

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## Abstract

The term “utilitarianism” in English translates into Chinese as *gongli zhuyi*. When Liang Qichao and Hu Shi first imported the concept of utilitarianism into the study of Mohist thought, the term was initially translated as *shili zhuyi* or *leli zhuyi*. The use of *gongli zhuyi* in Mohist studies was established only through the efforts of Yan Fu and Wu Yu to break down the negative connotations of *gongli* in traditional Chinese culture and through the systematic research and scholarly influence of Feng Youlan. The study of Mohist thought within the framework of utilitarianism as *gongli zhuyi* is now common practice throughout academia with few scholars objecting to the use of this term.

## Keywords

*Gongli zhuyi* – *Leli zhuyi* – Mohist thought – *Shili zhuyi* – Utilitarianism

In the hundred years before and after Hu Shi’s 胡適 [1891–1962] call from the pulpit of the New Culture movement to understand the issues of the times, incorporate Western ideas, systematically reorganize China’s past, and recreate Chinese civilization, the study of pre-Qin [before 221 BCE] thinkers has, under the battle cry of “importing Western theories to achieve democracy,” become a

fertile breeding ground for the proliferation of Western philosophical concepts in China. This rich soil allowed the pre-Qin thinker Mozi 墨子 [ca. 468–376 BCE], who had languished in the shadows of historical neglect for more than two millennia, to become once again the leading “opponent” of Confucius and Confucian studies, with many nineteenth- and twentieth-century Chinese scholars adopting him as the personified representative of classical democracy and scientific thought. Mozi proponents in the Qing dynasty [1616–1911], such as Zou Boqi 鄒伯奇 [1819–1869], Huang Zunxian 黃遵憲 [1848–1905], Chen Li 陳澧 [1810–1882], and Feng Cheng 馮澂 [b. 1866], resurrected passages in the *Mozi* to demonstrate the credibility of the “Chinese origins of Western knowledge” theory.<sup>1</sup>

In the early years of the Republic of China [1912–1949], anti-Confucian intellectuals, such as Yi Baisha 易白沙 [1886–1921] and Wu Yu 吳虞 [1872–1949], spoke about the Mohist idea of “exalting unity” [*shangtong* 尚同]<sup>2</sup> in terms of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract*;<sup>3</sup> and on the eve of the New Culture movement, Hu Shi was analyzing the logic in the text, especially in the dialectical chapters, through the lens of pragmatism.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, in the late Qing and early years of the Republic, the study of Mohist thought found itself bound fast to the social and political philosophical concept of utilitarianism, as promoted in the modern Western Enlightenment.

Like many other terms that spread to China from the West through the medium of translation, “utilitarianism” had to navigate translation issues across different cultures. Changes in the Chinese translation of “utilitarianism”

- 1 Wang Jixue 王繼學, “Moxue dui wan Qing Minguo shehui fazhan de yingxiang 墨學對晚清民國社會發展的影響 [The Impact of Mohism on the Social Development in the Late Qing and Republic Period]” (PhD diss., Shandong University, 2010). Wang Jixue’s thesis provides a detailed account of the historical context behind the theory that held Mozi to be the origin of Western knowledge. The thesis follows the development of the theory and outlines many of the criticisms to which it was subjected.
- 2 All translations of terms and passages from the *Mozi* text have been taken from Ian Johnston’s translation. See Ian Johnston, trans., *The Mozi: A Complete Translation* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2010). – Trans.
- 3 Yi Baisha 易白沙, “Guang Shangtong 廣尚同 [Promoting ‘Exalting Unity’],” in *Yi Baisha ji* 易白沙集 [Collected Works of Yi Baisha], ed. Chen Xianchu 陳先初 (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 2008); Wu Yu 吳虞, “Mozi de laonong zhuyi 墨子的勞農主義 [Mozi’s Bolshevism],” in *Xinhai geming qian shinianjian shilun xuanji* 辛亥革命前十年間時論選集 [Collection of Selected Articles from the Ten-year Period Prior to the 1911 Revolution], vol. 3, ed. Zhang Zhan 張枬 and Wang Renzhi 王忍之 (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 1977).
- 4 Hu Shih, *The Development of the Logical Method in Ancient China* (Shanghai: Oriental Book Company, 1922), 87. Also known as the *Mojing* 墨經, the dialectical chapters consist of six chapters at the end of the text. They consist of “Canons 1 and 2 [*Jingshang* 經上, *Jingxia* 經下],” “Explanations I and II [*Jingshuo shang* 經說上, *Jingshuo xia* 經說下],” “Choosing the Greater [*Daqu* 大取],” and “Choosing the Lesser [*Xiaoqu* 小取].”

reflect the way in which the concept was understood and accepted in modern China, a process that was inherently related to modern understandings of Mohist thought. This article traces changes in the translation of “utilitarianism” in modern Chinese scholarship from *shili zhuyi* 實利主義 and *leli zhuyi* 樂利主義 to *gongli zhuyi* 功利主義. The article also analyzes how the concept of utilitarianism was used and explained by modern scholars in the framework of Mohist studies.

## 1 A Matter of Benefit: Liang Qichao's *Shili* Utilitarianism

In an article titled “Is Mozi a Utilitarian Philosopher? The Significance of Mohist Ethical Thought in a Modern Context,” Hao Changchi 郝長擘 once expressed the hope that he could free Mohist studies from the concept of utilitarianism, to which it had been attached by the likes of Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 [1895–1990] and Li Zehou 李澤厚 [1930–2021] to give back to Mozi his true voice.<sup>5</sup> Even before the work of Feng Youlan and Li Zehou, the concept of utilitarianism had permeated Mozi studies. In the form of *shili* utilitarianism and *leli* utilitarianism,<sup>6</sup> utilitarian understandings of Mohist thought had been subtly influencing modern scholars since at least the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

5 Hao Changchi 郝長擘, “Mozi shi gongli zhuyizhe ma? Lun Mozi lunli sixiang de xian-dai yiyi 墨子是功利主義者嗎? – 論墨家倫理思想的現代意義 [Is Mozi a Utilitarian Philosopher? The Significance of Mohist Ethical Thought in a Modern Context],” *Zhongguo zhexueshi* 中國哲學史, no. 1 (2005).

See also English translation Hao Changchi, “Is Mozi a Utilitarian Philosopher?” *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 1, no. 3 (2006). – Trans.

6 Three translations of “utilitarianism” – *gongli zhuyi* 功利主義, *leli zhuyi* 樂利主義, and *shili zhuyi* 實利主義 – appear frequently throughout this article. To highlight the fact that, in this article, these terms all refer to translations of the English word “utilitarianism” (albeit expressing different understandings of it), subsequent references to these three terms, in expressing the concept of “utilitarianism,” are rendered as “*shili* utilitarianism,” “*leli* utilitarianism” and “*gongli* utilitarianism” (indicating which translation is used, not to denote a particular type of “utilitarianism”). When the term itself is referred to, the entire expression in pinyin is used (e.g., *leli zhuyi*). For greater readability, the word “utilitarianism” by itself is used in speaking of the word in English or when the general concept of utilitarianism is discussed, and differentiation is not deemed necessary.

Note that the terms *shili* utilitarianism and *leli* utilitarianism are misnomers as far as the “utility” in utilitarianism is concerned. A more literal translation of *shili zhuyi* and *leli zhuyi* is “practical-benefit-ism” and “pleasure-benefit-ism”; however, when used frequently, these translations become unwieldy, so they are not used here. – Trans.

7 Looking through the history of sinological research in both China and the West, the earliest reference connecting Mohist thought to the concept of utilitarianism is in an article written by the British sinologist Joseph Edkins [1823–1905] in January 1856. Edkins’s article in

As early as 1902, Liang Qichao 梁啟超 [1873–1929] had introduced a comprehensive set of theories related to what he called the “*leli* utilitarianism” of the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham [1748–1832]. In his article “The Doctrine of Bentham, the Master of *Leli* Utilitarianism,” Liang noted that “the Japanese translate this doctrine as the school of pleasure [*kuaile pai* 快樂派], with other translations, including the school of utility [*gongli pai* 功利派] and the school of use [*liyong pai* 利用派]. Having summarized the general principles of this doctrine in this article, I have chosen to use this translation [*leli zhuyi*] here.”<sup>8</sup> This shows that the first term that Liang chose to use when translating “utilitarianism” was *leli zhuyi*.

In the article “On General Tendencies in the Development of Chinese Thought” written the same year, Liang’s discussion of Mozi and Mohist thought contained only a few references to a connection to Western learning. In one section in the article, “A Comparison between Schools of Thought in the Pre-Qin to Those in Greece and India,” Liang merely mentioned that the shortcomings of the pre-Qin schools were due to their absence of logic. Although he noted that the *Mozi*, especially two dialectical chapters, “Choosing the Greater [*Daqu* 大取]” and “Choosing the Lesser [*Xiaoqu* 小取],” contained references to terms such as “hardness” and “white horses,” which were commonly used by scholars in the school of names [or logic; *mingxue* 名學], Liang dismissed the logical arguments in the text as “never having achieved the status of an academic discipline.” Liang believed that although Mozi had a deep understanding of the principles of nature and practical learning, very few carried on his teaching, and that by the time of the Qin [221–206 BCE] and Han [206 BCE–220] dynasties, it had long since been lost to history.<sup>9</sup>

Yet just two years later, in 1904, Liang published “The Teachings of Mozi [*Zi Mozi xueshuo* 子墨子學說],” in *New Citizen Journal* [*Xinmin congbao* 新民

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the *Journal of the North-China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* noted that “His [Mozi’s] views, while resembling Christianity in form, are much more akin in reality to the opinions of Bentham and Paley, who, had he lived in their day, would doubtless have claimed him as an ally.” See Joseph Edkins, “Notices of the Character and Writings of Meh Tsi,” *Journal of the North-China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, no. 5 (1858), 166. Edkins’s views as expressed in the article did not influence early sinological research conducted by English-language scholars and certainly had no impact on Chinese scholars’ research on Mozi.

8 Liang Qichao 梁啟超, “Leli zhuyi taidou Bianqin zhi xueshuo 樂利主義泰斗邊沁之學說 [The Doctrine of Bentham, the Master of Utilitarianism],” in *Yinbingshi heji: Zhuanji* 飲冰室合集·專集 [Collected Works from the Studio of the Iced-Water Drinker: Special Collection] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), 17:20.

9 Liang Qichao 梁啟超, *Lun Zhongguo xueshu sixiang bianqian zhi dashi* 論中國學術思想變遷之大勢 [On General Tendencies in the Development of Chinese Thought] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2001), 45–46.

叢報], in which he presented a systematic study of Mohist thought. In a section titled “The *Shili* Utilitarianism of Mozi,” Liang extensively used the term *shili zhuyi* across all aspects of Mohist thought, while at the same time referring throughout the article to the main theories of Western utilitarians, such as Bentham and John Stuart Mill [1806–1873]. Based on the Chinese-language documents that I have compiled so far, this is the first instance in which Mohist thought was meaningfully related to the concept of utilitarianism.

Why did Liang’s research into Mohist thought embrace comparisons with Western philosophy in 1904, and why did he replace *leli zhuyi* with *shili zhuyi* in his explanations of Mohist thought?

Liang’s choices may have been closely connected to the publication of *The Philosophy of Yang Zhu and Mozi* [Yang Mo zhexue 楊墨哲學], by the Japanese sinologist Takase Takejirō 高瀨武次郎 [1869–1950] in 1902. Admitting that Takase’s work had influenced the research methods and structure of “The Teachings of Mozi,” Liang noted that “the order in this section was taken from Takase’s *The Philosophy of Yang Zhu and Mozi*, but the conclusions are my own. I state this explicitly, as I would not dare to appropriate the achievements of others.” Takase’s book was translated into Chinese by Jiang Weiqiao 蔣維喬 [1873–1958] in 1928. In a section of the text where Takase analyzes Mozi’s ideas about “Condemning Music [*Feiyue* 非樂],” he notes that “Mozi was a proponent of *shili* utilitarianism. His focus was on things physical and material while he rejected that which was metaphysical. This position can be seen clearly throughout the text.”<sup>10</sup>

Liang’s section on “The *Shili* Utilitarianism of Mozi” makes frequent reference to Bentham and Mill. He believed that arguments made in the chapter of the *Mozi* called “Lu’s Questions [*Lu wen* 魯問]” – which he summarized as “anything that can set my conscience at ease is considered beneficial [*li* 利]; otherwise, it must be considered as not having any benefit” – corresponded to those made in his earlier article “The Doctrine of Bentham, the Master of *Leli* Utilitarianism,” namely that Mill’s extension of Bentham’s theory framed the choice between pleasure and pain not just in terms of quantity but also in terms of quality, arguing for a distinction between higher and lower pleasures.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the sections in Liang’s article that cited Mill, Bentham, and their theories were directly related to references to *shili* utilitarianism. This suggests

10 Liang Qichao 梁啟超, “Zi Mozi xueshuo 子墨子學說 [The Teachings of Mozi],” in *Yinbingshi heji: Zhuanji*, 37:2–3.

11 See Sun Yirang 孫詒讓, *Mozi jianqu 墨子閒詁 [The Mozi with Clarifications and Corrections]*, coll. Sun Yikai 孫以楷 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), 466; Liang Qichao, “Zi Mozi xueshuo,” 29; Liang Qichao, “Leli zhuyi taidou Bianqin zhi xueshuo,” 19–20.

that Liang believed there were similarities between the *shili* utilitarianism in Mohist thought and the arguments by Mill in *Utilitarianism* and Bentham in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*.

Looking across the entirety of Mozi's teachings on practical benefit [*shili* 實利], they generally tend to fall within the scope of that which is physical and material and are rather lacking in terms of that which is metaphysical. If [Mozi's teachings] had dealt with this [metaphysical benefit], then we could say that Mozi's concept of benefit would have been more complete.<sup>12</sup>

Here, the reference to the material and metaphysical in the first sentence is taken directly from *The Philosophy of Yang Zhu and Mozi*. The second sentence is Liang's reflection on *shili* utilitarianism, for, as Liang came to realize, using the term *shili zhuyi* alone did not fully explain the essence of Mohism.

Benefit [*li* 利] is not a term that Mozi avoided. Indeed, not only did he not avoid it but he also spoke of it so often that the term never seemed to leave his lips. Benefit is the guiding precept for all of Mozi's theories. Should the meaning of this term be eliminated, then the central framework upon which Mohist studies stand would collapse, and the doctrine would have no grounds on which to stand – this is a term that must be examined in detail. While it would seem that Mozi, an ardent proponent of universal love<sup>13</sup> and asceticism, would be the last person to be associated with the utilitarian philosophers, when we look at the text as a whole, the fundamental ideal underpinning the text is that of benefit – this is certainly quite different.<sup>14</sup>

Whereas Liang saw the concept of benefit as the guiding precept, central framework, and fundamental ideal underpinning Mohist studies, the *shili* utilitarianism in Mohist thought could not provide “metaphysical benefits,” and this was something for which only “religious thought” could compensate. In the article's first section, “Mozi's Religious Thought,” Liang pointed out that “the reason I refer to religious thought and *shili* utilitarianism is that

12 Liang Qichao, “Zi Mozi xueshuo,” 29.

13 Although *jian'ai* 兼愛 is commonly translated as “universal love” (including in Johnston's translation), recent scholars have argued for alternative translations, including “impartial caring” and “inclusive care.” See Carine Defoort, “Are the Three ‘jian ai’ Chapters about Universal Love?” in *The Mozi as an Evolving Text: Different Voices in Early Chinese Thought*, ed. Carine Defoort and Nicolas Sandaert (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 35–68. – Trans.

14 Liang Qichao, “Zi Mozi xueshuo,” 18.

these two concepts, like the two wheels of a chariot or the two wings of a bird, are the central driving force for the entire Mohist doctrine.”<sup>15</sup> That is, as far as Liang was concerned, in Mohist thought, the metaphysical benefits characterized by religion were in contrast to the material benefits characterized by *shili* utilitarianism.

To put it simply, morality and happiness balance each other out. This is a key characteristic of Mohist studies and puts the doctrine on the same footing as those in the West by Socrates and [Immanuel] Kant. In the Mohist doctrine, morality is found in the concept of universal love, while happiness is found in *shili* utilitarianism. These two concepts can achieve balance only as a result of Heaven’s intention [*tianzhi* 天志]. I see these three as making up the general framework of Mohist studies, with religious thought taking the central, most fundamental position.<sup>16</sup>

Although it might seem that universal love and asceticism are rather far removed from philosophical understandings of utilitarianism, Mozi’s religious thought resolved the contradictions between them. Bentham and Mill’s utilitarianism found full expression in Mohist thought only after being balanced by religious belief.

In this way, the *shili* utilitarianism of Mohism, which Liang framed as Western utilitarianism, referred to a concept of material benefits. In contrast to the metaphysical “benefits” of religion and other nonmaterial benefits, this *shili* utilitarianism existed within a framework of benefit that Mohists described in terms of “promoting the world’s benefits” [*xing tianxia zhi li* 興天下之利] and “universal mutual love and exchange of mutual benefit” [*jian xiang'ai jiao xiangli* 兼相愛交相利].

For a while after Liang Qichao’s writings, *shili zhuyi* was the Chinese catchword for the ideas of Bentham and Mill. As the term *shili* had an underlying meaning of “making practical use of,” intellectuals and democracy advocates during the Republican era began to employ *shili zhuyi* across a wide range of subject matter. In a speech at the Provisional Education Conference in 1912, Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 [1868–1940] proclaimed that “given our current state of affairs, we must draw on other types of education, such as *shili* utilitarianism

15 Liang Qichao, “Zi Mozi xueshuo,” 8.

16 Liang Qichao, “Zi Mozi xueshuo,” 10.

and military-civilian education.”<sup>17</sup> Cai understood *shili* utilitarian education as a synthesis of education and economics and saw it as an important means of achieving national prosperity. Only a few years later, in 1915, Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 [1879–1942] founded the magazine that would later become *New Youth* [*Xin qingnian* 新青年, also called *La Jeunesse*] with the impassioned article “A Call to Youth,” in which he declared that “ever since Mill’s *shili* utilitarianism was taught in England and [French philosopher Auguste] Comte’s positive philosophy was taught in France, the structures of European society and the minds of its people have been transformed.”<sup>18</sup> Three years later in an article on “*Shili* Utilitarianism and Vocational Education,” Liu Bannong 劉半農 [1891–1934] fleshed out Cai’s ideas on education and suggested that *shili* utilitarianism was “the highest form of spiritual cultivation.” Liu was also a strong advocate of the distinction between literary writing [*wenxue wen* 文學文] and practical writing [*yingyong wen* 應用文], arguing that the latter needed to be written in a style that was both practical and vernacular.<sup>19</sup>

However, by the 1920s, this wave of support for *shili* utilitarianism by Republican educators and teachers had mostly subsided. In 1922, in *A Record of Mozi and His Teaching* [*Mozi xue’an* 墨子學案], Liang Qichao once again employed the term *leli zhuyi*, which he had discarded in “The Teachings of Mozi.” However, this change may not necessarily have been driven by any personal revelations on Liang’s part. This is because over four years before Liang’s publication of *A Record of Mozi and His Teaching*, Hu Shi’s *Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy* [*Zhongguo zhexue shi dagang* 中國哲學史大綱] – which was basically an expansion of his PhD dissertation – was already in wide circulation throughout China. In his outline, Hu Shi divided the section on Mohist thought into two chapters, “Mozi” and “Neo-Mohism [*Bie Mo* 別墨],” and it was in this second chapter that, in his hands, *leli* utilitarianism formed one of the central tenets of neo-Mohism.

17 Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培, “Duiyu xin jiaoyu zhi yijian 對於新教育之意見 [Views Regarding New Education],” in *Cai Yuanpei quanji* 蔡元培全集 [Complete Collected Works of Cai Yuanpei] (Zhejiang: Zhejiang jiaoyu chubanshe, 1997), 235.

18 Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀, “Jinggao qingnian 敬告青年 [A Call to Youth],” in *Chen Duxiu wenzhang xuanbian* 陳獨秀文章選編 [The Selected Edited Writings of Chen Duxiu] (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 1984), 1:77.

19 Liu Bannong 劉半農, “Shili zhuyi yu zhiye jiaoyu 實利主義與職業教育 [Utilitarianism and Vocational Education],” in *Laoshi shuole: Liu Bannong suibi* 老實說了: 劉半農隨筆 [Honestly Speaking: Informal Essays by Liu Bannong] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2010).



## 2 A Humanist Approach: Hu Shi's *Leli* Utilitarianism

Hu Shi's early research in Mohist studies is primarily found in "The Development of the Logical Method in Ancient China" and *An Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy*.<sup>20</sup> The latter was basically an extension of the former; however, it was published in China several years earlier and quickly went on to have enormous influence on the academic community at the time. "The Development of the Logical Method in Ancient China" was written in English by Hu Shi while he was a PhD student at Columbia University (1915–1917). Nearly a quarter of it consists of a section on "The Logic of Mo Di and His School," in which Hu Shi expresses quite a high opinion of Mozi: "Mo Di [was] perhaps one of the greatest souls China has ever produced."<sup>21</sup>

Hu Shi uses the concept of utilitarianism to analyze Mohist thought in the English-language version of "The Development of the Logical Method in Ancient China" in only two places. The first is at the end of the introduction to Mozi, in which Hu Shi outlines the development and decline of neo-Mohism: "The growth of the school, however, appears to have been arrested toward the last half of the third century BC. At the end of that century, Mohism with all the schools disappeared entirely." Hu Shi believed that Mohism may have disappeared for the following reasons. First, "its doctrines of universal love and anti-militarism were incompatible with the needs of the age." Hu Shi then quotes the *Guanzi* 管子 to show evidence of this point. Second, Hu Shi writes, "nor was this age of warfare propitious to scientific research and philosophical speculation." This point is supported with a quote from the *Han Fei zi* 韓非子. Hu Shi then concludes: "thus the utilitarian basis on which Mohism was founded came back to itself as a boomerang and caused its own downfall."<sup>22</sup> The second place in which Hu Shi used the term was in relation to the second law of Mozi's Three Laws of Reasoning: "facts of the ears and eyes of the people." Hu Shi references this law with a footnote quoting Mill's *Utilitarianism*.

"The Development of the Logical Method in Ancient China" was not translated into Chinese until 1982, when the History of Chinese Logic Research Council [*Zhongguo luojishi yanjiuhui* 中國邏輯史研究會] arranged it. That is, Hu Shi himself did not translate "utilitarianism" into *gongli zhuyi*, nor did he

20 Published in 1918, the first volume of *An Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy* was merged with *The Development of the Logical Method in Ancient China* [*Xianqin mingxue shi* 先秦名學史] and edited by Hu Shi to become *A History of Ancient Chinese Philosophy*. See Hu Shi 胡適, "Zhongguo gudai zhexue shi 中國古代哲學史 [A History of Ancient Chinese Philosophy]," in *Hu Shi quanji* 胡適全集 [*The Complete Works of Hu Shi*], vol. 5 (Hefei: Anhui chubanshe, 2003).

21 Hu Shih, "The Development of the Logical Method in Ancient China," 60.

22 Hu Shih, "The Development of the Logical Method in Ancient China," 61–62.

devote many lines to the idea of utilitarianism, as his key research focus throughout the text was logical thought. This means that to probe Hu Shi's choice of translation of "utilitarianism" more deeply and to understand his research methods in greater detail, we need to turn our focus to his Chinese-language writings on the subject in *An Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy*.<sup>23</sup>

Originally published in Chinese in 1918, *An Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy* divides Mozi and neo-Mohism into two separate sections. Hu Shi believed that these two schools reflected the thinking of the early and later stages of Mohism.

In his section on neo-Mohism, Hu Shi used the term *leli zhuyi* to describe the key characteristics of later Mohist thought, which he identified as "new *leli* utilitarianism." "Although Mozi presented the idea that 'righteousness [*yi* 義] was the same as being of benefit,' he never went into this idea in detail. It wasn't until the neo-Mohists that we get a complete '*leli* utilitarianism.'"<sup>24</sup>

Hu Shi quoted from the dialectical chapter "Canons I [*Jing shang* 經上]" as evidence for his argument: "Righteousness is being of benefit. Benefit is what one is pleased to get. Harm is what one is displeased to get."<sup>25</sup>

Hu Shi believed that neo-Mohist philosophy was not one of vested self-interest or self-serving benefit but, rather, one of "*leli* utilitarianism for the entire world."

In terms of harm, it is to choose the lesser [harm]. In terms of harm, choosing the lesser is not to choose harm, but to choose benefit. What is chosen is controlled by others. In meeting a robber, to cut off a finger to spare the [whole] body is a benefit. Meeting a robber is the harm. Cutting off a finger and cutting off a hand are alike in terms of benefit to the world; there is no choosing.<sup>26</sup>

"The thinking of the neo-Mohist school corresponds with the philosophy of Bentham and Mill."<sup>27</sup> Here, Hu Shi's assessment demonstrates a connection between *leli* utilitarianism and utilitarianism.

23 Hu Shi, "The Development of the Logical Method in Ancient China," 57; Hu Shi 胡適, "Xian Qin mingxue shi 先秦名學史 [The Development of the Logical Method in Ancient China]," in *Hu Shi quanji*, 64–93.

24 Hu Shi 胡適, *Zhongguo zhexue shi dagang* 中國哲學史大綱 [*An Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy*] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2011), 291.

25 Sun Yirang, *Mozi jiangou*, 314; translation taken from Ian Johnston, *The Mozi: A Complete Translation*, 381, 395, 397.

26 Sun Yirang, *Mozi jiangou*, 404. Translation taken from Johnston, *The Mozi*, 581. – Trans.

27 Hu Shi, *Zhongguo zhexue shi dagang*, 292.

Following a trajectory similar to that of Liang Qichao, Hu Shi was the second Chinese scholar to carry out in-depth research into the connection between Mohism's understanding of benefit and the philosophies of Bentham and Mill. Although Liang first used the term *leli zhuyi*, he saw the ten doctrines<sup>28</sup> of Mohism only in terms of "practical benefit" and used religious thought as a way of extending this into the metaphysical domain. In contrast, Hu Shi took the Mohist school's *leli* utilitarianism and expanded its application to the dialectical chapters of the neo-Mohists. Therefore, he could see what Liang could not: the possibility that Mohism could transcend the "practical benefit" of the material world and meet psychological needs.

Whereas Liang Qichao sought a *shili* utilitarianism within the Mohist doctrines that emphasized the material and the physical, Hu Shi's use of *le* 樂 [pleasure, joy] as opposed to *shi* 實 [practical, real] shows that the benefit as found in the dialectical chapters could be matched with a humanist [*ren* 人] framework. Hu Shi's interpretation emphasized a more human-centered approach, in which the benefit to be obtained was not just a practical benefit but also one that could satisfy internal human needs, which would allow those who receive it to feel both pleasure and joy.

Hu Shi's use of *leli zhuyi* was not limited to his research on Mohist thought. Greatly influenced by the pragmatism of his teacher and mentor John Dewey [1859–1952], Hu Shi saw *leli* utilitarianism as a key characteristic of pragmatic Confucianism. From Hu Shi's point of view, the detailed investigations into usefulness and utility carried out by Li Gou 李觚 [1009–1059] and Wang Anshi 王安石 [1021–1086] in the Northern Song [960–1127] and by Chen Liang 陳亮 [1143–1194] and Ye Shi 葉適 [1150–1223] in the Southern Song [1127–1279] meant that they could all be seen as proponents of *leli* utilitarianism. Hu Shi saw this group as the forerunners of the school of thought in the late Ming [1368–1644] and early Qing dynasties advocating that learning be of practical use to society [*jingshi zhiyong* 經世致用].<sup>29</sup>

Thus it would seem that, when presented with *shili* utilitarianism, which emphasized physical and material needs, Hu Shi and Liang Qichao both used *leli zhuyi* as their ultimate translation for the utilitarianism of Bentham and

28 The "ten doctrines" here refer to the ten fundamental doctrines of Mohist thought. These are, in order of chapter sequence, "Exalting Worthiness [*Shangxian* 尚賢]," "Exalting Unity [*Shangtong* 尚同]," "Universal Love [*Jian'ai* 兼愛]," "Condemning Offensive Warfare [*Feigong* 非攻]," "Moderation in Use [*Jieyong* 節用]," "Moderation in Funerals [*Jiezang* 節葬]," "Heaven's Intention [*Tianzhi* 天志]," "Perceptive Ghosts [*Minggui* 明鬼]," "Condemning Music [*Feiyue* 非樂]," and "Against Fate [*Feiming* 非命]."

29 Hu Shi 胡適, "Dai Dongyuan de zhexue 戴東原的哲學 [The Philosophical Thought of Dai Zhen]," in *Hu Shi wenji* 胡適文集 [*Collected Works of Hu Shi*] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1998), 7:43–46.

Mill. Given this, it is pertinent to ask about the origins of the term *gongli zhuyi*. How did it become the generally accepted translation of “utilitarianism”?

### 3 The Rise and Triumph of *Gongli Zhuyi*

#### 3.1 *Differences in the Chinese and Western Understanding of Gongli and “Utility”*

Any in-depth analysis of the connection between Mohist thought and utilitarianism needs to be preceded by an investigation into the meaning of the term *gongli*. In English, the root of the word “utilitarianism” is “utility,” which means “practical use,” “usefulness,” and “public utility.” Following the philosophy of his teacher and mentor Jeremy Bentham, Mill further developed the meaning of “utilitarianism” as the idea of the greatest happiness and benefits for the greatest number. This allowed individuals to maximize their own benefits, while also allowing for overall benefit to be realized by groups of individuals, such as society and the international community.<sup>30</sup>

However, in Chinese, the term *gongli* has vastly different connotations. Bound together with the constraints of a Confucian paradigm that values righteousness over benefit, *gongli* could never escape the connotations of official rank, personal wealth, and short-term profit. This can be seen not only in instances where *gongli* appears in classical texts, such as the *Zhuangzi* 莊子<sup>31</sup> and the *Xunzi* 荀子,<sup>32</sup> but even in the works of some of the most “utilitarian”

30 John Stuart Mill 约翰·穆勒, *Gongli zhuyi* 功利主義 [*Utilitarianism*], trans. Xu Dajian 徐大建 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2014), 14.

31 In his chapter “Heaven and Earth [*Tian di* 天地],” *Zhuangzi* recounts a story of the meeting between Confucius’ disciple Zi Gong 子貢 [520–446 BCE] and a gardener. Upon seeing the gardener struggle to draw water from a well, Zi Gong pointed out that there were machines that could make his work much simpler. The gardener rejected this, stating that “where there are ingenious contrivances, there are sure to be subtle doings; and that where there are subtle doings, there is sure to be a scheming mind.... I do not know [the contrivance that you mention], but I should be ashamed to use it.” Zi Gong was taken aback by the words of the gardener and mulled over them for an entire day. When one of his followers asked about the matter, Zi Gong described how this meeting had allowed him to see that the way of the sage was actually one of simplicity. “[Such men] live in the world in closest union with the people.... Vast and complete is their simplicity! Success [*gong* 功], gain [*li* 利], and ingenious contrivances, and artful cleverness, indicate [in their opinion] a forgetfulness of the [proper] mind of man.” Translation taken from James Legge, *The Texts of Taoism* (New York: Dover, 1962), 1:319–21.

32 During a debate on military principles between Xunzi 荀子 [ca. 313–238 BCE] and the lord of Linwu 臨武君 before King Xiaocheng of Zhao 趙孝成王 [d. 245 BCE], the king asked Xunzi how a true king should go about employing soldiers. Xunzi then gave examples of the ways in which soldiers are employed in different states. These included

thinkers in the Southern Song, Chen Liang<sup>33</sup> and Ye Shi.<sup>34</sup> The term's negative connotations have remained; telling people that they are “very *gongli*” still carries strongly pejorative overtones, suggesting that they are profit seeking and focused solely on achieving personal ambitions. In terms of the Chinese translation of culturally loaded terms, *gongli* is probably not the most appropriate Chinese translation of the “utility” in utilitarianism. Notwithstanding the positive meanings of “utility” due to the modern Enlightenment's reverence for individual equality and freedom, *gongli* would never have been used as a translation by democracy advocates to promote utilitarianism as a positive philosophical notion.

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rewarding soldiers who come back with the head of an enemy (as used in the state of Qi 齊), using tests of physical ability (as used in the state of Wei 魏), and using a system of punishments and rewards where “rewards increase to keep pace with achievements” (as used in the state of Qin 秦). Xunzi then goes on to say that all these strategies are inferior to achieving unity among soldiers through the benevolence and righteousness of the king. “Therefore, to attract men to military service and recruit soldiers as they do, to rely upon force and deception and teach men to covet military achievements and profit – this is the way to deceive people. But to rely upon ritual principles and moral education – this is a way to unite them.” Translation taken from Burton Watson, *Xunzi: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 59–66.

- 33 During a debate between Zhu Xi 朱熹 [1130–1200] and Chen Liang on *li* and *yi* in connection with their understandings of a true king [*wang* 王] and a hegemon [*ba* 霸], Chen Liang drew from examples in canonical texts to highlight the importance of *gongli*, a term that Zhu Xi and his followers saw as negative and refused to accept as necessary. Chen Liang stated, “If Yu the Great had no achievements, how did he order the six treasuries? If Qian 乾 had no accomplishments, how did it possess the four virtues?” Here, Chen is referencing the *Book of Documents* [*Shangshu* 尚書] with the “six treasuries” referring to the five elements (metal, wood, water, fire, earth) and grain. The second example is from the *Yijing* 易經 [*Book of Changes*] and a reference to the first lines of the Qian hexagram. The four virtues refer to *yuan* 元 [supreme], *heng* 亨 [fortune], *li* 利 [profitable] and *zhen* 貞 [augury]. See Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲, *Song Yuan xue'an: Longchuan xue'an* 宋元學案: 龍川學案 [*Records of Song and Yuan Scholars: Record of Chen Liang*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 13. – Trans.
- 34 Writing in the Southern Song, Ye Shi, one of the leaders of the more practically oriented Yongjia School of Thought [*Yongjia xuepai* 永嘉學派], argued that although Dong Zhongshu's 董仲舒 [179–104 BCE] philosophy of “pursuing righteousness and not benefit, and promoting the *dao* and not seeking achievements” may initially seem justified, careful analysis revealed it to be quite superficial. Ye Shi believed that the ancients brought benefit to others and did not draw attention to their achievements [*gong*] and thus promoted the *dao* and righteousness. Attacking later Confucian scholars who had followed in the footsteps of Dong Zhongshu, Ye Shi observed, “If one has no achievements [*gong*] or profits [*li*], then the *dao* and righteousness are nothing but useless empty words.” Ye Shi 葉適, *Xixue jiyuan xumu* 習學記言序目 [*Study Notes on Classics and Histories*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 324. – Trans.

As early as 1903, Yan Fu 嚴復 [1854–1921] used *gongli zhuyi* in his translation of Mill's *On Liberty*; however, the translated English term was not in fact “utilitarianism.”<sup>35</sup> Yan Fu's translation of the only occurrence of “utilitarianism” in *On Liberty*, “the judicious utilitarianism of Aristotle,” was rendered as *quanheng shendang, guangbei minsheng* 權衡審當, 廣被民生 [balancing the comprehensive and appropriate, encompassing the livelihoods of the people].<sup>36</sup> It is noteworthy that Yan Fu's translation of Thomas Huxley's [1825–1895] *Evolution and Ethics* in 1897 contained a comment on the difference between the Chinese concept of *gongli* and the Western idea of “utility”:

Most ancient doctrines in both the East and the West pitted *gongli* against virtue so that they were diametrically opposed like fragrant herbs and foul herbs. Yet today, laws of biology are raised to show that one cannot survive unless one seeks personal gain. However, once we develop the intelligence of citizens, then they will know that without promoting the *dao* there can be no achievements, and that without pursuing righteousness there can be no benefit. What ill is there in *gongli*? It is a matter of how it is achieved. Thus, the West calls this the enlightened seeking of personal gain. This enlightened pursuit of personal gain is not antithetical to virtue.<sup>37</sup>

Yan Fu's comment on the relationship between *gongli* and virtue was a continuation of the ideas of Chen Liang and Ye Shi in the Southern Song and show that he acknowledged the legitimacy of Western concepts such as “the enlightened seeking of personal gain” and “utility.” In inquiring “what ill is there in

35 Yan Fu's use of *gongli zhuyi* occurs in the translation of the following passage from *On Liberty*: “let not society pretend that it needs, besides all this, the power to issue commands and enforce obedience in the personal concerns of individuals, in which, on all principles of justice and policy, the decision ought to rest with those who are to abide by the consequences (John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. David Bromwich and George Ketab [London: Yale University Press, 2003], 146).” Yan Fu's Chinese translation: “謂社會必挾其多數之力，製為法律功令，取人人小己所自將者，而號令劫持之，曰必舍汝所欲而從我，此不徒于公理為不倫，即以功利主義言之，亦未見其有益也。” (John Stuart Mill 密爾, *Qunji quanjie lun* 群己權界論 [*On the Boundary between the Rights of the Individual and Society (On Liberty)*], trans. Yan Fu 嚴復 [Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1981], 89) It is interesting to note that Yan Fu's use of *gongli zhuyi* here does not seem to be directly connected to any word in the English original (though if one had to be chosen it would be “policy”).

36 Mill, *Qunji quanjie lun*, 26.

37 Yan Fu 嚴復, trans., “Tianyan lun 天演論 [Evolution and Ethics],” in *Yan Fu ji* 嚴復集 [*Collected Works of Yan Fu*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 5:395.

*gongli*?" Yan Fu was rejecting the negative connotations of selfishness and individualism that had enveloped the concept of *gongli* for thousands of years.

Not long after Yan Fu's translation, Wu Yu, one of the New Culture movement's fiercest critics of Confucius, also saw a connection between utilitarianism and Mohist thought and exploited this connection to break down fixed ideas in Confucian discourse. Unlike Liang Qichao and Hu Shi, Wu Yu was not an expert in Mohist studies, yet his fervent passion for attacking Confucius and Confucianism, to which he devoted his entire life, led Hu Shi to commend him as "a battle-hardened warrior who singlehandedly fought against the house of Confucius" and "the dustman who came to clear out China's philosophical trash."<sup>38</sup> Having spent time studying in Japan, Wu Yu was an ardent follower of Western learning and was extremely active in promoting Western concepts of democracy and freedom in China.

Wu Yu's approach to attacking Confucianism was to find alternative Chinese schools of thought that could be used as weapons to fight on behalf of Western learning. Given Mozi's open attacks on Confucianism as well as Mencius's criticism that Mohist thought espoused "universal love without acknowledging the particular affection due to one's parents," Mohist thought was Wu Yu's perfect weapon of choice. Wu Yu believed that, of the nine major pre-Qin schools of thought, only Mohist thought could take the fight to Confucianism, which was further evidenced by more than one hundred lines of textual arguments between Confucius and Mozi and between Confucianism and Mohism. Noting that the philosophies of Yang Zhu 楊朱 [395–335 BCE] and Mozi were both "not only popular in their time, but also contained many coincidental connections with Western philosophical doctrines,"<sup>39</sup> Wu Yu went on to match up Western doctrines and their representatives with the key tenets adopted by Mozi and Yang Zhu. Examples of the connections made with Mohist thought include the following:

Mozi's universal love was like Jesus' love for all; his teachings on recipient ghosts [*minggui* 明鬼] were akin to Socrates' belief in the spirits; his moderation in use [*jieyong* 節用] was similar to the asceticism of Antisthenes; his cultivation of the self [*xiushen* 修身] resembled Plato's synthesis of intellect and virtue; his chapters on "Choosing the Greater" and "Choosing the Lesser" comparable to Mill's *System of Logic*; his doctrine of condemning offensive warfare [*feigong* 非攻] much the same

38 Hu Shi 胡適, "Wu Yu wenlu 吳虞文錄 [An Account of Wu Yu]," in *Hu Shi wenji*, 2:608–10.

39 Wu Yu 吳虞, "Bian Mengzi pi Yang Mo zhi fei 辨孟子辟楊墨之非 [Analyzing Mencius's Attacks on Yang Zhu and Mozi]," in *Xinhai geming qian shinianjian shilun xuanji*, 3:739.

as the Russian emperor's mission for peace; and his essential idea that "benefit is good" comparable to the utilitarianism of Abraham Tucker.<sup>40</sup>

Wu Yu mocked Mencius for only seeing benefit as selfish and personal and for being unable to see the wider utilitarian understandings of the term.

Yang Zhu's doctrine of benefiting the self was unarguably inferior to that of utilitarianism. Yet when King Hui asked Mencius how he would benefit his state, he was referring to a utilitarian benefit. Mencius did not know this and misunderstood the benefit as pertaining to benefiting the self, thus his answer was wide of the mark.<sup>41</sup>

Carine Defoort notes that "Wang Chong, for instance, criticized Mencius for being consciously confusing in his rebuke of the king of Wei." As Wang Chong 王充 [27–100] states, "Now, there are two kinds of *li*: there is material *li* and there is the *li* of well-being. When King Hui asked: 'How to *li* my state?' how did Mencius know that the king did not mean the *li* of well-being? But Mencius went ahead, taking exception to material *li*."<sup>42</sup> That is to say, Defoort and Wu Yu both disagree with Mencius's criticisms of Mozi's utilitarian thinking.

Wu Yu's comparison of *gongli* utilitarianism with Mozi's concept that "benefit is good" was the result of modern Chinese scholars re-examining the meaning of *gongli* under the influence of modern Western thought, following the work of Yan Fu. By the eve of the New Culture movement, *gongli* utilitarianism had become the border between traditional morality and a new emerging morality in Republican China. Some scholars even took the view that the entire New Culture movement could be seen as an intellectual Enlightenment based on the central idea of *gongli* utilitarianism.<sup>43</sup>

Chen Duxiu vehemently opposed Mencius's distinction between righteousness and profit and believed that morality and material interests should be

40 Wu Yu, "Bian Mengzi pi Yang Mo zhi fei," 3:739.

41 Wu Yu, "Bian Mengzi pi Yang Mo zhi fei," 3:739.

42 Carine Defoort, "The Profit That Does Not Profit: Paradoxes with 'Li' in Early Chinese Texts," *Asia Major* 21, no. 1 (2008): 170.

43 Lin Yusheng 林毓生 noted that, during the May Fourth period, the drive to study Western learning was driven by utilitarian motives, whereas Liu Shipei 劉師培 [1884–1919], writing for his monthly journal *National Heritage* [*Guogu* 國故] in 1919, criticized the New Culture movement for promoting utility and science while dismissing propriety and cultural mores. See Lin Yusheng 林毓生, *Sixiang yu renwu* 思想與人物 [*Ideas and People*] (Taipei: Lianjing chuban youxian gongsi, 1983); Lin Heng 林衡, *Shiji jueze: Zhongguo mingyun dalunzhan* 世紀抉擇: 中國命運大論戰 [*The Choices of the Century: The Fight for the Fate of China*], vol. 3 (Beijing: Shishi chubanshe, 1997).



pursued together. In “Further Questions Addressed to the Correspondents of the *Eastern Miscellany*” in 1919, he noted that “utilitarianism’s stance on rights, namely the greatest happiness for the greatest number, was a key condition for citizens’ rights and freedom, as well as for a constitutional republic.”<sup>44</sup>

During the New Culture movement, Qian Xuantong 錢玄同 [1887–1939], an ardent supporter of the abolition of Chinese characters, proclaimed that he had always been a utilitarian. In the “Biography of Qian Xuantong,” written after Qian’s death in 1939, his friend Li Jinxi 黎錦熙 [1890–1978] stated with a heavy heart and great tenacity of spirit that “Qian Xuantong found his life’s calling in Mozi’s utilitarianism, the greatest happiness for the greatest number.”<sup>45</sup> Qian Xuantong’s unbounded veneration for Mohist thought and utilitarianism had led to the merging of these two concepts within Li Jinxi’s framework of values.

Following modern scholars’ opposition to and dissatisfaction with China’s “old morals,” as personified in Confucius and Mencius, *gongli* broke free of the negative Confucian framework to which it had been bound and was infused with positive connotations. At the same time, *gongli zhuyi* began to replace *shili zhuyi* and *leli zhuyi* and soon became the undisputed Chinese translation for “utilitarianism.” As with earlier changes in the translation of “utilitarianism,” the final stages of this process once again were completed after a reanalysis of Mohist thought, which in this case was driven primarily by Feng Youlan.

### 3.2 *Feng Youlan’s Gongli Utilitarianism*

Not long after arriving at Columbia University in 1921, Feng Youlan delivered a lecture in English on “Chinese Philosophy” titled “Why China Has No Science: An Interpretation of the History and Consequences of Chinese Philosophy,” in which he asserted that Mozi was the second-most-important thinker in pre-Qin China after Confucius. In his remarks on the essence of Mohist thought, Feng stated that “the fundamental idea of Mohism is utility. The sanction of virtue is not that it is natural, but that it is useful.” Feng then cited the line from the “Canons I” chapter in the *Mozi* as textual evidence for his position, “righteousness is being of benefit, benefit is what one is pleased to get.” By this

44 Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀, “Zai zhiwen *Dongfang zazhi* jizhe 再質問‘東方雜誌’記者 [Further Questions Addressed to the Correspondents of the *Eastern Miscellany*],” in *Chen Duxiu wenzhang xuanbian*, 1:347.

45 Li Jinxi 黎錦熙, “Qian Xuantong xiansheng zhuan 錢玄同先生傳 [Biography of Qian Xuantong],” in *Jingshi zhanshi tekan* 經世戰時特刊 [*Statecraft Wartime Special Issue*], 47–48 (1939): 10.

time, Feng's studies of Mohist thought were already fixed on a course that saw "Mozi's position in ethics [as] essentially that of utilitarianism."<sup>46</sup>

Feng completed his PhD dissertation, "A Comparative Study of Life Ideals" (in English) in 1924, and it was published in English by the Commercial Press in Shanghai the following year. In the chapter titled "Utilitarianism: Mozi," Feng directly summed up Mohist thought as utilitarian:

To represent this type we have chosen Mozi's philosophy, which we consider as the most systematic utilitarianism of ancient times.... As we shall see, Mozi not only gave us an abstract principle of utility, but a complete structure of society, state and religion that was built upon that principle.... We hope Mozi may be a good illustration of both the excellence and defects of utilitarianism.<sup>47</sup>

Then, Feng examined Mozi's writings from a social, political, and religious perspective and outlined how Mohist thought was established on a utilitarian basis. He compared Mohist thought to the hedonism of Yang Zhu and systematically differentiated a hedonism that "benefits the self" and a utilitarianism that "benefits others."<sup>48</sup> At the same time, Feng quoted several passages in Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principle of Morals and Legislation* to show parallels with Mohist thought. One example is the following:

Bentham said: Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*.... The *principle of utility* recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system.... We shall see that this is exactly what Mozi did. In his work, however, he did not speak so much of pleasure and pain, as of their objective counterparts, benefit and harm.<sup>49</sup>

Feng's research on the Mohist ideas of universal love, exalting unity, exalting worthiness [*shangxian* 尚賢], and moderation in use were all carried out within a framework that saw utilitarianism as the basis of Mohist thought. In a section called "What Is the Greatest Benefit of the People?" Feng argued that

46 Fung Yu-lan, "Why China Has No Science: An Interpretation of the History and Consequences of Chinese Philosophy," *International Journal of Ethics* 32, no. 3 (1922): 245.

47 Fung Yu-lan, *A Comparative Study of Life Ideals* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1925), 243–50.

48 Fung Yu-lan, *A Comparative Study of Life Ideals*, 243–50.

49 Fung Yu-lan, *A Comparative Study of Life Ideals*, 248; Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Kitchener, UK: Batoche Books, 2000), 14.

ideas concerning moderation in use show examples of the utilitarian calculations made by the Mohists. “Identifying the increase of wealth and population with the greatest benefit to the country and the people, Mozi went on to fight against anything that had no direct utility to it. In the first place he was against any kind of luxury.”<sup>50</sup> At the end of this chapter, Feng outlined the defects of Mohist utilitarianism: “But that we should sacrifice every kind of immediate enjoyment for that end only is certainly too utilitarian a theory. I say it is too utilitarian, because it pays too much attention to the future.”<sup>51</sup>

At the conclusion of his chapter on Mozi, Feng cites Xunzi’s [ca. 313–238 BCE] critique of Mozi – that he was “blinded by utility and did not know refinement” – as well as a passage from *Shuo Yuan* 說苑 by Liu Xiang 劉向 [ca. 77–ca. 6 BCE], recounting a dialogue between Mozi and his disciple Qin Guli 禽滑釐, in which Mozi notes that “the procedure of the sages is to have material goods first, then refinement.” Feng uses these quotations to illustrate that the Mohists did not neglect “refinement” [wen 文] but, rather, that as utilitarians, they believed that there could be no refinement without utility. Feng presented the reasons for the development of this kind of thinking at the end of the chapter, “Mozi seemed to have in his mind the presupposition that the natural environment of man is so fixed that what man can do is after all but very little. So the best policy for preserving his race is hard work and economy.”<sup>52</sup>

This shows that Feng’s utilitarianism had both the “practical benefit” of hard work and economy and the “pleasurable benefit” [*leli*] of having first material goods and then refinement. In Feng’s reading, the Mohists promoted integration of the individual’s material and spiritual pursuits and revealed the Mohist idea of seeking benefit for the state, society, and the world.

Feng’s first official use of *gongli zhuyi* in relation to Mohist studies was in the 1926 publication of *Philosophy of Life*. Essentially a Chinese translation of his PhD dissertation, *Philosophy of Life* continued Liang Qichao’s appraisal of Mohism as utilitarian and used *gongli zhuyi* as the Chinese translation of “utilitarianism.”<sup>53</sup>

Following an approach similar to that of Hu Shi, Feng’s first volume of *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, published in 1931, divided Mohist thought into two chapters, “Mozi and the Early Mohists” and “The Dialectical Chapters and

50 See Feng Youlan 馮友蘭, *Rensheng zhexue* 人生哲學 [*Philosophy of Life*] (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2005), 71.

51 Feng Youlan, *Rensheng zhexue*, 84.

52 Fung Yu-lan, *A Comparative Study of Life Ideals*, 249, 255, 130; See Feng Youlan, *Rensheng zhexue*, 71, 78.

53 Feng Youlan, *Rensheng zhexue*, 67.

the Later Mohists.” In the first of these chapters, Feng presented Mozi as an extreme utilitarian, whereas in the second – which included a section on “The Utilitarianism in the Dialectical Chapters” – he revealed how the utilitarian nature of Mohist thought gradually changed. Quoting many passages in the dialectical chapters, Feng argued that the extreme utilitarianism of the early Mohists had matured by the time of the later Mohists to emphasize a utilitarianism that went beyond material benefit: “The doctrine of utilitarianism forms the basis of Mozi’s philosophy, but though Mozi himself stressed utility, he failed to explain *why* we should thus value it. The ‘Mohist Canons’ go one step further and supply utilitarianism with a psychological basis.”<sup>54</sup>

Feng’s utilitarian understanding of Mohism continued unchanged, as seen in the section “Yang Zhu and Mozi [*Yang Mo* 楊墨]” in “A New Treatise on the Nature of Dao [*Xin yuan Dao* 新原道],” published in 1945: “Utilitarianism formed the basis of all the theories promoted by the Mohist school.... The Mohist theories on the origins of the state and society were also utilitarian in their nature.”<sup>55</sup>

In his explication of Mohist understanding of *li* in *A Comparative Study of Life Ideals*, Feng built on the work on the *shili* utilitarianism and *leli* utilitarianism in Mohist thought by Liang Qichao and Hu Shi, while also following the *gongli* utilitarian turn that emerged in China around the time of the New Culture movement. As far as Feng was concerned, the term *gongli* was no longer bound to the negative connotations of Confucian discourse and was, instead, a reflection of the legitimate value and effects of *li* – with success measured in the achievement of a shared profit that satisfied the material and psychological needs of the greatest number. This understanding corresponded with Yan Fu’s “enlightened pursuit of personal gain” and the Western “utility” of Wu Yu’s “benefit is good.” So, under Feng’s hand, *gongli zhuyi* gained increasingly widespread acceptance.

### 3.3 The Final Triumph of Gongli Utilitarianism

In the decade after Feng Youlan’s publication of *Philosophy of Life*, several notable works on Chinese philosophy that all drew heavily on Feng’s *Philosophy of Life* and *A History of Chinese Philosophy* hit the shelves, including *Outline of the Political and Social Ideas of Pre-Qin Thinkers*, by Ji Wenfu 嵇文甫 [1895–1963];

54 Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Derk Bodde (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1952), 1:248. The term “Mohist canons” refers to the dialectical chapters of the *Mozi*. – Trans.

55 Feng Youlan 馮友蘭, “Xin yuan Dao 新原道 [A New Treatise on the Nature of Dao],” in *Sansongtang quanji* 三松堂全集 [*The Complete Works of Feng Youlan*] (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 2000), 5:31.

*History of Ancient Chinese Philosophy*, by Chen Yuande 陳元德 [fl. 1937]; and *Laozi and Mozi's Philosophical Outlook on Life*, by Cai Shangsi 蔡尚思 [1905–2008]. Although none of these scholars examined Mohist thought in detail – most presented Mohism in terms of broad generalizations<sup>56</sup> – they all used the term *gongli zhuyi* in their analysis of Mohism. This shows that, in just a decade, Feng's use of *gongli zhuyi* in researching and analyzing Mohist thought had set a new trend in Mohist studies that was accepted by the wider academic community. Feng's influence in the field can be gauged by the number of scholars who followed his approach and employed *gongli zhuyi* in their research.

Yan Lingfeng 嚴靈峰 [1904–1980] was one such scholar, with the publication in 1958 of *A Mozi Compendium*, which presented the most detailed analysis of Mohism's utilitarian philosophy since Feng Youlan.

Yan saw the unshakeable position of *gongli* utilitarianism in Mohist thought as extremely important. Yan's analysis, in contrast to that of Feng Youlan, did not draw on the work of Bentham and Mill and, instead, presented a close reading of the *Mozi* in which he examined the meaning of *li* in the ten doctrines. According to Yan, Mohist *gongli* utilitarianism was an important factor in each of them. Citing the chapter “All under Heaven [*Tianxia* 天下]” in the *Zhuangzi*, in which Mozi is criticized for taking his ideas on moderation in the use and condemnation of music too far, Yan concurred with Zhuangzi's critique and argued that the *gongli* utilitarianism of the Mohist school, seen in its attacks on the “ceremonies and music of the ancients,” was a case of overcorrection.<sup>57</sup>

In contrast to Yang, Feng Youlan dramatically changed his position on Mohism's *gongli* utilitarianism in the 1960s. In the *New Edition of a History of Chinese Philosophy*, published in 1962, Feng discarded most of his arguments on the utilitarian philosophy of Mohism and, instead, made greater use of terms commonly found in Chinese Marxism: materialism and idealism.<sup>58</sup>

56 Chen Yuande 陳元德, *Zhongguo gudai zhexueshi* 中國古代哲學史 [*History of Ancient Chinese Philosophy*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1937); Cai Shangsi 蔡尚思, “Lao Mo zhexue zhi renshengguan 老墨哲學之人生觀 [Laozi and Mozi's Philosophical Outlook on Life],” in *Cai Shangsi quanji* 蔡尚思全集 [*The Complete Works of Cai Shangsi*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2005); Ji Wenfu 嵇文甫, *Xian-Qin zhuzi zhengzhi shehui sixiang shuyao* 先秦諸子政治社會思想述要 [*Outline of the Political and Social Ideas of Pre-Qin Thinkers*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1930).

57 Yan Lingfeng 嚴靈峰, *Mozi jianbian* 墨子簡編 [*A Mozi Compendium*] (Taipei: Shangwu chubanshe, 1968), 91; James Legge, *The Texts of Taoism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), 2:218.

58 After the founding of the People's Republic of China [1949], Feng Youlan's interpretation of the Mohist school's utilitarianism underwent significant change. In his new edition of *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Feng stated: “Mohist thought developed on a path

Changes in scholars' understanding of Mohist thought were intimately connected with their attempt to navigate the social mores and political environment of their time. Yet, although interpretations of Mohist utilitarianism may have shifted in modern Mohist studies, *gongli zhuyi* – following the work of Feng Youlan – has become the sole Chinese translation of “utilitarianism” in studies on Mohist thought and, more generally, on Chinese philosophy and culture. *Shili* utilitarianism and *leli* utilitarianism are now historical footnotes, though perhaps these historical translations can be used by modern scholars to re-evaluate the work of Liang Qichao and Hu Shi.<sup>59</sup>

#### 4 Conclusion

Because of the transmission of Western learning during the late Qing dynasty and early years of the Republic, utilitarianism became the main concept through which Mohist thought was interpreted. This was led by the *shili* utilitarianism and *leli* utilitarianism of Hu Shi and Liang Qichao, followed by Wu Yu's efforts to free *gongli* from the negative connotations it held in Confucian discourse and his use of *gongli* utilitarianism in Mohist studies. Feng Youlan's positioning of *gongli* utilitarianism as a central concept in Mohist thought and his deep analysis of the term helped to cement *gongli zhuyi* as the sole Chinese translation of “utilitarianism” in Chinese cultural studies. This process led to the formation of a close connection between Mohist thought and utilitarianism, reconstructing Mohist studies through the framework of Western learning. At the same time, scholars and advocates of democracy, such as Wu Yu, Feng Youlan, and Qian Xuantong, took advantage of these changes in Mohist studies to call for *gongli* to be understood not as a synonym for being selfish and self-seeking but as a term for promoting individual equality and inner happiness and as a democratic idea that could help to gradually achieve the greatest happiness and prosperity for all. Modern scholars' appropriation of Western

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towards materialism. The Latter Mohist school rejected the idealist elements in Mohist thought and further developed aspects related to materialism and science. In doing so, they helped Mohist thought to become a relatively complete system of materialism.” See Feng Youlan 馮友蘭, “*Zhongguo zhexueshi xinbian shigao* 中國哲學史新編試稿 [New Edition of a *History of Chinese Philosophy* Trial Version],” in *Sansongtang quanji*, 7:6, 163.

59 Kawajiri Fumihiko 川尻文彦, “Ziyou' yu 'gongli' – Yi Liang Qichao de 'gongli zhuyi' wei zhongxin ‘自由’與‘功利’ – 以梁啟超的‘功利主義’為中心 [‘Liberty’ and ‘Utility’ – Liang Qichao's ‘Utilitarianism’],” *Zhongshan daxue xuebao* 中山大學學報, no. 5 (2009). In the article, Kawajiri carefully plots out the historical path behind Liang Qichao's concept of utilitarianism.

utilitarianism to reconstruct Mohist thought is an example of the patriotic drive to learn from the West in order to resist the Western powers. Their appropriation also spurred the process in which culturally loaded Western terms, such as “ethics,” “logic,” “equality,” and “philosophy,” sought to achieve a legitimate foothold in Chinese cultural discourse. These Western terms, which gradually worked their way into studies on ancient Chinese thought around the end of the Qing and early stages of the Republic, soon dominated discourse in the field and ultimately led scholars to explain Chinese concepts through a Western lens. This has had an impact on the way in which Chinese thought has been and continues to be studied. Understanding how Western terms were adopted by Chinese scholars to explain Chinese culture can help us to better see the direction of current cultural exchanges between China and the West today and is an area that is certainly worth exploring further.

*Translated by Michael Broughton*

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