Hu Shi was a leader of the early twentieth-century New Culture Movement. Hu was known for his writings on language reform and literature revolution. Labeled as the leader who sought construction, not destruction, Hu Shi was criticized by conservatives and Communists alike for his efforts and views during the Movement.

Hu Shi, an educator and a major leader in the New Culture Movement, was born as Hu Hongxing in Shanghai in 1891. Hu Shi lost his father, a government official, when he was only three. Growing up in a family of declining fortune, Hu Shi witnessed the struggle of his mother, widowed at the age of twenty-two, in dealing with the irresponsible and insolent step-sons of her husband’s deceased former wife, quarrelsome daughters-in-law, and creditors who came to collect debt every New Year's Eve. His mother’s self-restraint and resilience influenced Hu Shi to make pragmatic choices in both his personal life and public career.

Hu Shi's education began in the Chinese tradition at age three, first under the tutelage of his father in Shanghai, then at a traditional school in his native county of Jixi in Anhui Province. In 1904 Hu Shi returned to Shanghai for education at so-called “modern” schools. He had his first exposure to vernacular writing at the China Public Institute, where he was an editor of a student periodical, Commitment Ten-Day Weekly (Jingye Xunbao), and tried his hand at writing fiction in the vernacular. He also had his first taste of student protest there when students demanded participation in drafting school regulations but were refused by the authorities and expelled from the school. After a brief period of teaching at a middle school, Hu Shi passed the national examination for the Boxer Indemnity Fellowship. In taking the examination, Hu took the name of “Shi” (to adapt), which carried a distinctive flavor of social Darwinism at the time. In 1910 he went to Cornell University on the fellowship and, at the advice of his brother, enrolled in the College of Agriculture. His interest in the humanities soon led him to transfer to philosophy. He was attracted to U.S.-style democracy when he observed the pre-election process in 1913, participated in public rallies, and gave many public lectures on Chinese affairs—at the cost of nearly failing his course. In 1914 he graduated with a bachelor’s degree and went to Columbia University to study philosophy with educator John Dewey, the leading advocate of pragmatism, an influential school in American thought of the twentieth century.

Hu began to participate in China’s New Culture Movement, a movement among intellectuals advocating a new Chinese culture based on Western-style (rather than Confucian) thought and ideals, while still a student in the United States. Between 1915 and 1916 he and a few other friends at Cornell and Harvard engaged in a debate on the use of the vernacular, as opposed to classical, in literature. “A Preliminary Discussion on Reform in Literature,” an article published in New Youth Magazine in 1917, was Hu Shi’s national debut in...
the vernacular language movement, to be followed by more writings on language reform and literature revolution. In the same year Hu Shi returned to China, married Jiang Dongxiu, an illiterate girl betrothed to him through his mother’s arrangement when both were in their teens, and began teaching philosophy at the prestigious Beijing University. Hu’s approach to the history of Chinese philosophy was ridiculed by conservatives but instantly popular among students. He also joined the *New Youth* editorial board in 1918 and contributed regularly to the weekly.

**Isms vs. Problems**

In contrast to the political radical Chen Duxiu and cultural radical Qian Xuantong, Hu took moderate, pragmatic approaches to both politics and culture, arguing for the need of gradualism to attain revolutionary ends. His most well-known solutions were “less talk on isms, more discussion on problems” in his 1919 rejoinder to Li Dazhao, the co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party, and “bold hypothesis, careful investigation” for scholarly research. Thus, Hu emerged among the leaders of the New Culture Movement as the one who sought construction, not destruction. He became a vocal advocate for the vernacular and wrote *A History of Vernacular Literature* for its historical justification; he researched the authorship of *A Dream of Red Chamber* and issues relating to several other important fictions and ancient works, such as *The Water Margin* and *Journey to the West*. Hu’s efforts raised the status of these vernacular fictions and made them canonized works in Chinese literature. His research method also influenced generations of scholars after him. Some of them, such as Gu Jiegang, Luo Ergang, Fu Sinian, and Yu Pingbo, became leaders in the study of Chinese history and literary history.

Hu Shi’s liberalism made him an uncomfortable ally of the National Government under the Guomindang but an even harsher critic of the Chinese Communists in the late 1920s. He opposed hasty confrontation with Japan when its aggressive expansion in China escalated after the Manchurian Incident in 1931. However, he turned away from what others viewed as appeasement after the War of Resistance against China (also known as the Second Sino-Japanese War) broke out in 1937 and supported resistance by offering himself to government service. In 1938 he accepted the mission to the United States and Europe as a semiofficial emissary seeking Western support of China’s war effort. Between 1939 and 1942 he was China’s ambassador to the United States. He stayed in the United States for the remaining years of the war and researched *Annotation on the Book of Rivers* by Li Daoyuan (d. 527) and the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) scholarship of the book. Hu returned to China in 1946 and was appointed chancellor of National Beijing University. In 1949, when the ruling Nationalist government collapsed on the mainland, Hu Shi went to the United States and was curator of the Gest Library at Princeton University between 1950 and 1952.
Caught in the Crossfire

Throughout his life Hu Shi was criticized by both the conservatives and the Communists alike for his radical influence in the New Culture Movement or for his pragmatism and gradualism. On the mainland Hu Shi was the target of a Communist ideological campaign in 1954 in which he was criticized for promoting John Dewey’s pragmatism movement. In the same year Hu accepted the presidency of Academia Sinica in Taipei, Taiwan. His appointment immediately provoked the publication of books in Taiwan that attacked him for causing the social and cultural disorientations in China that opened the way to the Communist revolution. Still presiding over Academia Sinica, Hu died in 1962. In the 1980s and 1990s, scholarly interest in Hu Shi revived on the mainland as volumes of monographs were published and his importance in history recognized.

LU Yan

Further Reading


Hu Shi. (1959). *Hu Shi liuxue riji* [Hu Shi’s diary while studying abroad]. Taipei, Taiwan: Commercial Press. (Original work published 1939)

