ABSTRACT

On 14 February 1923, a modern Confucian scholar Carsun Chang delivered a speech entitled View of Life at Hsing Hwa University. He stressed that “scientific methods” were only for scientific research and not applicable to the way of life. This was obviously not harmonized with the main stream of thought during the May Fourth period that regarded science as the only reliable way to gain knowledge. As expected, Chang received an immediate rebuttal from the followers of scientism. The first to react was Ting Wen-Chiang, a geologist and a friend of Chang. In an article entitled Metaphysics and Science, Ting called Chang a “metaphysical ghost”. To Ting, Chang’s speech was a direct consequence of the revival of metaphysics that was nearly wiped out by scientists and “scientific philosophers” after many years of hard work.

The argument between Chang and Ting triggered a debate, which was later known as “The Debate between Science and Metaphysics”, that lasted for almost two years. It involved many famous characters of that time, like Liang Chi-chao, Hu Shih, Chen Duxiu, Wu Chih Hui, etc. This is one of the most influential events that had ever happened in the history of modern Chinese thought.

My dissertation will reveal that the primary concern of both parties was to strengthen the morality of mankind. At the same time, both parties were trying to construct their own philosophy of life based on morality. To the supporters of scientism, the only way to explain and improve morality was to use scientific methods, while to their opponents, the
ability of science was limited in the context of the way of life. According to them, intuition or other metaphysical ways will do a better job.

My dissertation will also point out that the debate can be divided into three stages. In stage one, Chang and Ting discussed extensively on a wide range of topics such as the nature of science and metaphysics, war and civilization etc. In stage two, the supporters of scientism equipped themselves with Darwin’s theory of evolution. By doing so, they held a naturalistic view on man and suggested that the morality of mankind was just the result of evolution and was nothing metaphysical. Their opponents refuted this viewpoint and stressed that morality was beyond the explanation of science. In the third stage, the Marxists joined the debate and built their theory of morality based on historical materialism.

Not long after the debate, the Marxism interpreted in a unique way by Mao Tse-tung dominated the intellectual world under the name of science, but it proved to be destructive to the development of modern Chinese thought as no objection could be tolerated. On the other hand, it was the school of Modern Confucianism in opposition to scientism that successfully harmonized science and morality, and finally contributed to the flourishing of modern Chinese thought.