

# Reconstructing Liang Qichao

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Liang Qichao (1873-1929) is a noticeable figure of China during the late nineteenth-early twentieth century. Living through the last forty years of the Qing dynasty and the first twenty years of Republican China, he was both an enthusiastic recipient and influential initiator of major social and intellectual reforms. In contemporary mainland China, Liang Qichao is portrayed as a patriotic yet frustrated historical figure and a conservative constitutionalist, whose failure highlights the success of Communists in bringing China to prosperity. A major high school history syllabus states the following:

Liang Qichao did not want to overthrow the monarch. He believed that the emperor's power should be reserved before political rights are granted to the public, because the public had not yet acquired the basic political knowledge and consciousness. Therefore, Liang is a compromising and wavering figure because he still retained illusion about the monarchy system.<sup>1</sup>

In Western scholarship, Liang Qichao is a crucial research subject. Phillip Huang, in *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Modern Chinese Liberalism* considered Liang an inconsistent intellectual whose ideologies witnessed great fluctuations with time.<sup>2</sup> Hao Chang, in *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Intellectual Transition in China* claimed that there was no significant improvement in the intellectual trajectory of Liang Qichao after the *New Citizen Journal* closed in 1907.<sup>3</sup>

The paper interrogates interpretations of Liang Qichao to prove that Liang Qichao's ideological trajectory was not a haphazard wandering through schools of thoughts but a consistent intellectual evolution, in which Liang actively learnt different theories yet also examined them critically to gradually establish his own theory of New Citizen, which also underwent a ceaseless development. His role in this process was not merely a "popularizer of new ideas" as Huang claimed or a "wavering and compromising figure" as Communists argued. He was a progressive spirit continuously seeking new ideas and a civic-minded individual constantly concerned with his nation's destiny.

## The brief intellectual trajectory of Liang Qichao

Liang Qichao was born in 1873 during the "Self-Strengthening Movement."<sup>4</sup> He started Confucius learning from five years old and passed the second level provincial test at sixteen. However, just one year later, he rejected the orthodox learning to study with Kang Youwei (康有为 1858-1927) - an enthusiastic advocate of the "New Text Confucianism"<sup>5</sup> and the Mencian ideal of "benevolent rulers."<sup>6</sup> This ideology was tested during "The Hundred Days' Reform of 1898."

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<sup>1</sup> Zheyang Ni, *Weaving Moral Fibers in a Corrupt World: Liang Qichao and the Evolving Lexicon for Civic Virtue in 20<sup>th</sup> Century China* (Connecticut, 2015), 34.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Huang, *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Modern Chinese Liberalism*. (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> See Hao Chang, *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Intellectual Transition in China* (Harvard University Press, 1971).

<sup>4</sup> China's clash with the West began with the First Opium War (1839-42). Failure in this war opened a series of military defeats and territorial concessions from 1842 to 1901. In 1861, the Qing initiated a Self-Strengthening Movement to learn from Western military, technology, science and industry.

<sup>5</sup> "New Text Confucianism" is a school of thought that was based on Confucian classics recompiled in the early Han dynasty by Confucians who survived the destruction of books and scholars during the Qin dynasty. During the nineteenth century, it became a major movement, which—according to B. Elman—aimed to solve the crisis of confidence between the state and its gentry-scholars in late Qing dynasty. See Benjamin Elman, *A. Classicism, politics, and kingship: the Chang-chou school of New Text Confucianism in late imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> See Antonio S. Cua, *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy* (Routledge, 2012), 446-448.

However, the Reform failed. Liang and Kang escaped to Japan. China's failure in the First Sino-Japan war (1895) simulated an enthusiastic "Japanese learning" movement during the 1898-1912 period. Liang underwent the significant transformation from an essentially Confucian intellectual into a modern liberal nationalist.

Since coming to Tokyo [...] I have made friends who are as close to me as my own brothers. [...] I have widely collected Japanese book and read them. [...] My mind has as a result changed, my thinking and words have become so different from before as to appear to be those of another person.<sup>7</sup>

Liang abandoned the pre-1898 belief in the Mencian ideal and emphasized the need for each individual to assert his rights actively, rather than to wait passively for the benevolence of the government: "Rights can only be secured by each citizen's struggling for them [...] He who wants to have the right of liberty must seek to be strong."<sup>8</sup> Under the impact of Fukuzawa Yukichi and Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* (1859),<sup>9</sup> Liang concluded that the national power depended on each individual's cultivation of "self-reliance, self-respect and the spirit of independence."<sup>10</sup> His ideology would be crystallized in *Discourse on The New Citizen* (1902), which emphasized individual rationality and self-reliance.<sup>11</sup> In 1902, Liang also published *New Citizens Journal*, which became highly impactful with an estimated readership of 200,000.<sup>12</sup> After a brief and unsatisfactory participation in politics, Liang resumed his intellectual discourse and turned to Buddhism in final years of life.

### Nationalism and liberalism

Phillip Huang, in *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Modern Chinese Liberalism* considered Liang an inconsistent intellectual. Huang claims that after Liang's trip to the United States in 1903, Liang abandoned all the previous belief in individual rights to advocate government authority. Huang attributes this ideological change, which was crystallized into the "enlightened despotism," to the urgent requirement of China at the time. Huang considered this change an abandonment of liberal commitments.<sup>13</sup>

In a China that had suffered repeated humiliations and encroachments from the imperialist powers, he could not help but be concerned first and foremost with the sovereignty and survival of the Chinese nation.<sup>14</sup>

However, the paper argues that there was no tension between liberal and nationalistic tendencies in Liang Qichao's ethos. He harmonized both these tendencies in the New Citizen theory. For Liang, a powerful nation depended on new citizens. These new citizens ought to possess both the civic virtue and the independence. Because Liang already discarded the Mencian ideal of "benevolent ruler"

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<sup>7</sup> Ting Wen-chiang, *First draft of a chronological biography of Liang Ch'i-ch'ao* (Taipei, 1959), 93.

<sup>8</sup> Liang Qichao, *Collected Works and Essays of Liang Ch'i-ch'ao* (Shanghai, 1932), 5:49

The point was originally made in Philip Huang, *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Modern Chinese Liberalism*, 60-61.

<sup>9</sup> Fukuzawa Yukichi is considered the father of modern Japan. He maintained that the national dignity of Japan could be attained only when her people adopted his suggested moral program of "independence and self-respect." Another Japanese intellectual who also advocated Victorian "gospel of work" was Nakamura's translation of Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* (1859) –emphasized diligence, discipline, and preservation. See Bob T. Wakabayashi, *Modern Japanese Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 354-355.

<sup>10</sup> Hiroko Wilcock, "Japanese Modernization and the Emergence of New Fiction in Early Twentieth Century China: A Study of Liang Qichao," *Modern Asian Studies* (1995): 819.

<sup>11</sup> Huang, 66-67.

<sup>12</sup> James Z. Gao, *Historical Dictionary of Modern China (1800-1949)* (Lanham, 2009), 200.

<sup>13</sup> Huang, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Phillip Huang, *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Modern Chinese Liberalism*, 83.

from 1895, “new citizens” would have the right and obligation to rebel against authoritarian rulers as an assertion of their political rights. Thus, individual rights and national power were interdependent.

Any possible tension that might have occurred when the individual’s desire was opposed to national benefit was not solved by the “enlightened despotism” conception as Huang argued in *Liang Ch’i-ch’ao and Modern Chinese Liberalism*, but by Liang’s interpretation of Buddhism in the final years of his life. Indeed, the philosophy of Buddhism that Liang claimed encouraged both individual rationality and civic virtue to the extent of selflessness. This interpretation implied that if an individual knew by his rationality that the government was authoritarian, he ought to revolt. However, at the same time, if he knew that his individual desire was irrational and could interfere with the nation’s benefit, he ought to suppress it. Thus, it did not matter whether the individual decided to revolt against the government or whether that decision was right or wrong. What mattered was whether the individual’s decision was based on rationality and a civic spirit. In other words, Liang’s New Citizen theory dealt less with social movements than with individual rational and moral struggles. Therefore, Liang’s thought concentrated on individuality as an end, not just a means of nationalism as Huang claimed in his book. Similarly, this sense of individuality was not shadowed by nationalism after Liang’s visit to the United States as Huang claimed. From the beginning to the end, Liang stayed consistent to his emphasis on individual rationality and civic virtue as absolute conditions for national power.

### **Buddhism and New Citizen**

Hao Chang, in *Liang Ch’i-ch’ao and Intellectual Transition in China* claimed that there was no significant improvement in the intellectual trajectory of Liang Qichao after the *New Citizen Journal* closed in 1907 and considered his pursuit of Buddhism a reactionary retreat to religion to find peace.<sup>15</sup> However, Liang did not see Buddhism as a superstition but a practical philosophy for individuals and a motivational force for social progress, which similar to Fukuzawa Yūkichi’s *jitsugaku*.<sup>16</sup> Liang contended that Buddhism encouraged both moral virtue and critical thinking. In an article titled *On the relationship between Buddhism and Democracy*, Liang noticed that Christianity, the prevalent religion in the contemporary Western culture, did not encourage critical inquiry and characterized the God as an autocratic Devine. In contrast, Buddhism was suitable for a democratic system because it stimulated self-introspection and self-independence.<sup>17</sup> Because everyone could become a Buddha, Buddhism advocated universal goodness rather than individual goodness and equality rather than differentiation.<sup>18</sup> In Liang Qichao’s interpretation, the two central qualities of a New Citizen, liberty and nationalism, mingled harmoniously in Buddhism. A person cultivated in education and Buddhism was both a critical and civic-minded being, who challenged oppressive governments and selflessly abandoned his wellbeing for the common good if necessary. In other words, Liang’s interpretation of Buddhism’s ideology encompassed both the liberty (self-reliance) and nationalism (civic virtue) of New Citizen. He studied Buddhism to internalize his theory into a faith that could easily spread out in contemporary China. Witnessing the serious lack of beliefs in the Chinese society due to its exposure to modernity, Liang advocated Buddhism as a way to restore faiths and morality:

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<sup>15</sup> See Hao Chang, *Liang Ch’i-ch’ao and Intellectual Transition in China* (Harvard University Press, 1971).

<sup>16</sup> Hiroko Wilock, “Japanese Modernization and the Emergence of New Fiction in Early Twentieth Century China: A Study of Liang Qichao,” *Modern Asian Studies* (1995): 819.

<sup>17</sup> Klein Jansen, *Christian Meyer Globalization and the Making of Religious Modernity in China: Transnational Religions, Local Agents, and the Study of Religion, 1800-Present* (Brill Academic Publishers, 2014), 348.

<sup>18</sup> Francesca Tarocco, *The Cultural Practices of Modern Chinese Buddhism: Attuning the Dharma* (Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism, 2008), 9.

Will progress in governing China be attained using faith? [...] I believe that the root of faith is religion... some say that education can take the place of religion, but I dare not accept this statement. And even if it may be so this would apply only to countries where education is universal... This time has not yet arrived in China.<sup>19</sup>

Liang Qichao's discussion of faith was not a betrayal of his emphasis on education and the New Citizen campaign of the 1898-1903 period. He considered both education and faith effective tools to popularize the ideal of New Citizen. However, at the time, he emphasized the latter because China did not have universal education. The Buddhist faith in Liang's interpretation was both a continuation and development of the New Citizen theory before.

### West and East

Beside the relation between citizens and nation, Liang Qichao also tackled the question of maintaining Chinese identity in the global context. Liang attempt to balance the Western and Eastern discourses culminated in his interpretation of Buddhism. Liang's recognition of the tension between cultural exclusiveness and global integration was closely intertwined with his trips to the United States and Europe. Liang Qichao's trip to the U.S. in 1903 brought about two crucial transformations in his ethos, regarding first, the means for social changes and second, the position of China in global context. The second change is demonstrated in his ideological shift from *Selected Memoir of Travels in the New World* to *Ji Huagong jinyue*, both published in 1903. In the former memoir, Liang acknowledged the terrible conditions of Chinese immigrants even when they lived in a democratic society, criticizing them as having "only the character of clansmen, not the character of citizens." By attributing this failing to the Confucian teaching of "first regulate the family in order to govern the state,"<sup>20</sup> Liang claimed that this failing was part of Chinese cultural trait and was also shared by Chinese back home, and thus concluded that "we can only accept despotism, we cannot enjoy freedom."<sup>21</sup> It is this conclusion that created the mistaken belief of a tension between liberalism and nationalism in Liang's ethos.<sup>22</sup> In fact, Liang Qichao in *Selected Memoir of Travels* failed to address the impossibility of his compatriots in acting like "citizens" in a country whose anti-immigrant atmosphere prevented them from even being considered citizens.<sup>23</sup>

However, Liang's ethos underwent a major change with the essay *Ji Huagong jinyue*, published later in the same year. Instead of distancing himself from Chinese immigrants to judge their cultural shortcomings, he identified with them to sympathize with their animosity against the United States' mistreatment. This empathy led Liang to two significant conclusions. First, he realized that that the sufferings of the Chinese diaspora in America resulted less from their cultural traits and more from the failure of China as a nation in maintaining a respected position and protecting her people from mistreatment in foreign countries. Second, he acknowledged the danger of the wholesale Western admiration that he always advocated:

[I]f we do not resist exclusion, then within ten years, in this vast New World, there will be not one foot left by the descendants of the Yellow Emperor.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Tarocco, *The Cultural Practices of Modern Chinese Buddhism* (New York Publisher), 83.

<sup>20</sup> Confucius, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning & The Doctrine of the Mean* (Dover Publications, 1971), 20.

<sup>21</sup> Liang Qichao, *Collected Writings from an Ice-drinker's Studio* (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1936), 122.

<sup>22</sup> See Phillip Huang's *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Modern Chinese Liberalism*, 45-58.

<sup>23</sup> For a re-evaluation of Liang Qichao's trip to the Unites States, see K. Scott Wong, *Liang Qichao and the Chinese of America: A Re-Evaluation of His "Selected Memoir of Travels in the New World"* (Journal of American Ethnic History, Vol. 11, No. 4, Summer, 1992)

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*,13.

In this essay, Liang commends the overseas Chinese for their “unwillingness to assimilate with the American. This ‘national culturalism’ is the special characteristic of independent self-respect. This is the first breath of national building.”<sup>25</sup> At this point, he maintained that the fundamental weakness of Chinese people was their lack of lofty ideals, which could be understood as the desires to assert their cultural uniqueness and political rights.<sup>26</sup> This evaluation revealed a tension in the need of China both to participate in the global discourse of civilization and to maintain its cultural identity. Liang’s attempt to resolve this tension attained another stage with his *Biographies of China’s Eight Great Colonial Heroes* (1904).<sup>27</sup> Instead of lamenting the Chinese diaspora’s sufferings, he depicted them as voluntary adventurers and expansionists of the Chinese civilization. Continuing the emphasis on cultural exclusives first hailed in 1903, Liang attributed the diaspora’s marital spirit, which made the Chinese diaspora an exception to the rule of extinction of the unfit, to the Chinese origin.<sup>28</sup> This re-appreciation of Eastern civilization was reinforced after Liang Qichao’s trip to Europe in 1928:

I therefore hope that our dear young people will, first of all, have a sincere purpose of respecting and protecting our civilization; secondly, that they will apply Western methods to the study of our civilization and discover its true character; thirdly, that they will put our own civilization in order and supplement it with others' so that it will be transformed and become a new civilization; and fourthly, that they will extend this new civilization to the outside world so that it can benefit the whole human race.<sup>29</sup>

Liang Qichao’s gradual change from the wholesale support of Western learning and condemnation of Chinese culture to re-appreciation of Chinese civilization did not result solely from his “emotional commitment” to the Chinese origin as Joseph Levenson maintained or from the fear for the extinction of “descendants of the Yellow Emperor” as demonstrated in *Ji Huangong jinyue*.<sup>30</sup> This ideological change also came from his observations of imperfections in Western society, as reflected in his *Observations on a Trip to America* (1903). Liang’s disappointment with the extreme “unequal distribution of wealth,” the destructive manipulation of “trusts,” and the inhumane lynching, which he considered “unimaginable among civilized countries” led him to be disillusioned by the Western civilization and shifted his attention to the Eastern philosophy, which he deemed sufficient to uphold civilized ideals.<sup>31</sup> For example, the trip to the United States led Liang to a world view in terms of racial and class characteristic, which is similar to the traditional Confucian world view based on social hierarchies.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, his conception of rights, as demonstrated in *On Quanli Consciousness* is essentially a phenomenon rooted in the Chinese tradition rather than borrowed from abroad. Though Liang agreed with Rudolf von Jherin in *The Struggle for Law* that rights were defined by laws and that asserting one’s rights meant both upholding one’s self-respect and the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.,10.

<sup>26</sup> Patricia Ebrey, *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook, 2nd ed* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 335-340.

<sup>27</sup> Jing Tsu, *Extinction and Adventures on the Chinese Diasporic Frontier*, (Journal of Chinese Overseas, Volume 2, Number 2, November 2006), 248.

<sup>28</sup> See Jing Tsu, *Extinction and Adventures on the Chinese Diasporic Frontier*.

<sup>29</sup> Bary, William Theodore, et al., eds. *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960).

<sup>30</sup> See Joseph R. Levenson, *Liang Ch 'i-ch 'ao and the Mind of Modern China* (Berkeley, 1967), 1.

“Every man has an emotional commitment to history and an intellectual commitment to value, and he tries to make these two commitments coincide.... [As Liang began his career, he was] straining against his tradition intellectually, seeing value elsewhere, but still emotionally tied to it, held by his history. [...] The attempt to live up to both commitments led him to try to “smuggle Western values into Chinese history.”

<sup>31</sup> Patricia Ebrey, *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook, 2nd ed* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 335-340.

<sup>32</sup> K. Scott Wong, *Liang Qichao and the Chinese of America*, 16.

nation's civilization, Liang did not deem laws the absolute, unchanging standard "smelted onto us from the outside."

It is not the case that one leader invents them in order to restrain the people. Instead, they come from the innate good knowing common to all people's hearts."<sup>33</sup>

In other words, Liang contended that legal procedures were simply "artificial laws" that mirrored humans' interpretation of Ethics, the most absolute law. Because these interpretations always had deficiencies, laws similarly were open to constant changes. This view justified the people's right to revolt against rulers they deemed authoritarian, as demonstrated in Liang's New Citizen conception. It denied the Mencian passive dependence on "benevolent rulers" yet upheld ethics – a central theme of Menian thinking, as Liang himself noticed:

"Mencius said that '[if the people] are allowed to lead idle lives, without education and discipline, they will degenerate back to the level of animals.' If we consider the legal principles of the Roman law, isn't this close to this idea [of Mencius]?"<sup>34</sup>

Liang Qichao's enthusiastic support for Buddhism in final years of his life, therefore, reflected a new development in both his New Citizen conception and his re-discovery of Eastern philosophy.

Many Western scholars have wanted to import Asian civilization as a corrective to their own. Having thought the matter over carefully, I believe we are qualified for that purpose. Why? In the past, the ideal and the practical in Western civilization have been sharply divided. [...] Now pragmatism and evolutionism are being promoted, the aim being to embrace the ideal in the practical and to harmonize mind and matter. In my opinion, this is precisely the line of development in our ancient systems of thought. Although the schools of the sages—Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Mo Tzu—are different, their common goal is to unify the ideal and the practical.... Also, although Buddhism was founded in India, it really flourished in China. [...] Take Chinese Meditation Buddhism [Chan, Zen]. It can truly be considered as practical Buddhism and worldly Buddhism.<sup>35</sup>

In short, it is obvious that Liang Qichao's ethos were not as inconsistent as Communists or Phillip Huang in *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Modern Chinese Liberalism* contended, nor did they stop developing after 1907 as Hao Chang claimed in *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Intellectual Transition in China*. The paper has proven that Liang followed a consistent and constant intellectual trajectory until the end of his life to answer two crucial questions about the relation between citizens and the national tension between cultural exclusiveness and global integration, to both of which he found answers in Buddhism.

### **Inconsistence in ideology**

During his life, Liang Qichao was impacted by various schools of thought. Communists called Liang Qichao a "wavering and compromising figure"<sup>36</sup> and recognized him merely as a "great patriot" and an "ideologist of the bourgeoisie."<sup>37</sup> Philip Huang claimed that Liang's inconsistencies revealed a "basic dilemma of most Chinese liberals" and recognized him most essentially as a

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<sup>33</sup> Angle, Stephen, *Should We All Be More English? Liang Qichao, Rudolf von Jhering, and Rights*, (Journal of the History of Ideas, Vol. 61, No. 2 (Apr., 2000), pp. 241-261, University of Pennsylvania Press), 245.

<sup>34</sup> Angle, Stephen, *Should We All Be More English*, 247.

<sup>35</sup> William Theodore, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 25.

<sup>36</sup> Zheyang Ni, *Weaving Moral Fibers in a Corrupt World*, 34.

<sup>37</sup> Liang Qichao Memorial Hall, <http://www.yinbingshi.org/h-guanyuwoguan/jieshao-english.html>, accessed September, 2015.

“popularizer of new ideas.”<sup>38</sup> Both of these views implied that inconsistencies were unfavorable. However, the paper argues that inconsistency in Liang’s ethos was necessary and that beneath the superficial inconsistency, Liang remained consistent to his ideal. This argument expands Joseph Levenson’s discussion about the tension between ideologies and realities:

Intellectual history is made by tension between an idea as thought at a particular time and place, by a particular person, who derives it from what he can see in the objective world around him, and the idea in a hypothetically abstract, logical state. Since every man lives in history, every idea thought by men must be colored by this particularity, kept by time from the white nirvana of absolute logical coherency.<sup>39</sup>

Liang Qichao was tackling the ever-changing reality instead of the static ideologies. Liang’s inconsistencies reflected the interaction of Chinese society when exposed to the Western world. Thus, his changes were not undesirable but favorable because they demonstrated a constant learning process.

Liang’s purpose was not to establish his own school of thought, but to tackle the ongoing problems in China’s society and to improve the lives of his countrymen, as he wrote in his diary in 1899, “I must do whatever I can to import European thought and spirit for the next generation.”<sup>40</sup> Liang’s attitude resembled the eminent philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806-73), who influenced him substantially, “when old notions and feelings have been unsettled and no new doctrines have yet succeeded to their ascendancy [...] when people of any mental activity [...] listen eagerly to new opinions [...] but this state of things is necessarily transitory.”<sup>41</sup> Mill considered himself more as “an interpreter of original thinkers and mediator between them and the public” than as the creator of the new systems.<sup>42</sup> So did Liang Qichao. His characteristic “inconsistencies” reflected a remarkably open reception of new ideas.

This reception, however, was very selective. Liang never completely embraced any theory but always modified them according to the situation of China. An example was Liang’s acquisition of the international imperialism ideal publicized by Kato, which had origins in Spencer’s Social Darwinism. In *Social Statics*, Spencer insisted on the “survival of the fittest” and the individual’s right to ignore the state. In his interpretation of this idea, Kato argued that national power was directly proportional to efficiency in utilizing the energies of the society. Thus, imperialism, war, colonialism and slavery were all necessary for progress.<sup>43</sup> Although Liang Qichao was highly impacted by Kato at the time, he criticized Kato’s nationalistic interpretation of Spencer’s social Darwinism as “extreme and prone to abuses.” Liang was conscious enough to realize that Kato’s international Darwinism had a twofold implication: it emphasized the importance of Japan’s national survival, yet also justified Japan’s expansionism. The situation of China was different. China confronted critical threats of foreign invasion not only from the West but also from Japan. Therefore, Liang fervently objected to imperialism. However, he also enthusiastically emphasized the necessity of a nationalistic Chinese nation and a new citizenry so China could survive in this increasingly competitive world.<sup>44</sup> This example proves that Liang Qichao was never merely a “popularizer of new ideas” as Huang claims

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<sup>38</sup> Philip Huang, *Liang Ch’i-ch’ao and Modern Chinese Liberalism*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Levenson, *Preface in Liang Ch’i-Ch’ao and the Mind of Modern China* (Los Angeles, 1970), 153.

<sup>40</sup> Zheyang Ni, *Weaving Moral Fibers in a Corrupt World*, 19.

<sup>41</sup> John Stuart Mill, *The Autobiography of John Stuart Mill* (Create Space, 2009), 34-46.

<sup>42</sup> John Stuart Mill, *The Autobiography of John Stuart Mill*. The point was originally made in Phillip Huang, *Liang Ch’i-ch’ao and Modern Chinese Liberalism*, 75.

<sup>43</sup> Kawamura, *Sociology & Society Of Japan* (Routledge, 1994), 18.

<sup>44</sup> Lu Yan, *Re-Understanding Japan: Chinese Perspectives, 1895-1945* (University of Hawaii Press, 2014), 31.

but an active learner and critical thinker, who selected from different ideologies the most appropriate aspects according to the political and social context of China.

### **Inconsistence in political program**

When mainland China's historians consider Liang the "ideologist of the bourgeoisie" or attributed his failure to the "illusion about the monarchy system," they judge Liang with extreme contradictions: constitutional monarchy versus republic, bourgeoisie class versus peasants, reform versus revolution, reactionary versus progressive. Even in modern China, the authoritarian ruling of the Communist Party means that anything that does not align with Communist ideology is unfavorable. Past figures like Liang Qichao, therefore, are depicted as conservative constitutionalists, reactionary reformers, and bourgeoisie leaders who tried but failed miserably in rescuing China. Because they were unsuccessful, their ideals of constitutionalist monarchy and reform were wrong. However, their "mistakes" are now acknowledged and corrected by Communists, who are rightful owners of the country, who are leading the country to prosperity and civilization.

Implicit in this interpretation is another sign of binary thinking: because Liang Qichao and the scholars of his generation belonged to the past, they were restricted by their time and were unable to acquire more progressive ideas. This binary thinking implies that the new is always a better version of the old. Because Liang belonged to the past, his ideology was all outdated and today's people had nothing to learn from him but the enthusiastic patriotism. However, in China, patriotism – the love for China – is always deeply intertwined with the love for the Communist Party. Therefore, the dichotomous interpretation of Liang Qichao helps Communists fulfill three purposes: confirming the "rightness" of their ideology, discouraging the learning of ideologies opposed to Communist ideology, and stimulating loyalty for the Party.

This interpretation of Liang's ethos offers new insights to explain Liang's unsuccessful participation in politics. From the 1890s to 1911, Chinese intellectuals were divided between "Constitutionalists" represented by the Protect the Emperor Society (*Baohuanghui*) and "Republicans", represented by the Revive China Society (*Xingzhonghui*). After the The Xinhai Revolution, which overthrew the Qing dynasty and established the Republic of China, Sun Yat-sen became the first president. However, in 1905, Yuan Shikai claimed power and opened a prolonged warlord period. Wishing to expand constitutional democracy, Liang Qichao worked in the cabinet and became the Minister of Finance in 1917. However, after a few months, he left politics due to disappointment with the president. Thus, though Liang was able to advocate the New Citizen agenda on a conceptual level through critical and impassioned writings, he never successfully exercised and popularized this theory through political campaigns. Liang's Party lost in the race to power, and his time in the cabinet was very brief.

Communist historians employ Liang's political downfalls to label Liang as a failure. In doing so, they make the mistake of applying a single standard to judge different types of people. Using Charles Kadushin's term, Liang Qichao was a clerically-inclined intellectual while Mao Zedong was a revolutionary intellectual. Clerically-minded intellectuals regarded education as an enlightening process. Revolutionary intellectuals, such as Mao, viewed education as a training process.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, while the concept of the New Citizen was central to Liang's ethos and indeed remained his consistent pursuit throughout his intellectual evolution, the questions of reform or revolution, constitutional monarchy or republic were his secondary concerns and thus, were open to changes. His greatest transformation in the political program happened after the trip to the United States in 1903, when he shifted from wavering support for both revolution and reform to the complete encouragement of gradual reform. Liang realized that "liberty could not be implemented overnight

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<sup>45</sup> Charles Kadushin, *Preface in The American Intellectual Elite* (Boston, 1974), 13.



by revolution” because self-cultivation was an individual discourse and the fact that a person advocated some progressive slogans and social campaigns did not necessarily mean that the person had acquired the self-reliance and civic virtue of a New Citizen.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, the question of the political program was central to Mao and Communist leaders, who, in contrast, did not care as much about the idea of “new citizen” as its value in political campaigns. Mao also established a party called New Citizens Society, which reflected Liang’s ideas. Despite its similar name with Liang’s ethos, Mao’s Society’s purpose was not to educate people with critical thinking and civic virtue but to train people who obediently abided by the Party’s ideology and propaganda.

### **Implications from the Re-Evaluation of Liang Qichao**

The story of the interpretation and misinterpretation of Liang Qichao raises awareness about the trap of propaganda, dichotomous thinking, and applying incompatible standards for judgment. Liang’s attitude toward his intellectual trajectory suggests interesting implications about the meaning of changes in Chinese history. A reexamination of interpretations about Liang Qichao depicts him with two characteristics: constant change and avoidance of extremes. These characteristics are closely intertwined. Indeed, if one is open to changes and considers changes part of life, one is more rational and less radical about changes. Because one sees life as constantly evolving, every change leads to a different version, not an opposite one, and thus, is a modification, not a refutation of the past. In contrast, if one has a stagnant spirit, the change itself becomes an end, not a means. The excitement and chaos surrounding changes naturally lead to the complete shift to an opposite version, a refutation of past. Liang Qichao clearly belonged to the former type, who saw changes as a means for individual enlightenment and social progress. And between the two, the former was clearly a more sustainable mindset for positive changes.

Liang’s harmonization of liberal and nationalistic discourses and Western and Eastern learning, as well as his prioritization of reform and self-cultivation over revolution and social mobilization, however, alienated him from the uprisings of the 1920s, when the anti-Confucianism movements of radicals and revolutionary intellectuals were in vogue. Liang Qichao understood the philosophy of change and knew that the extreme tone of May Fourth radicals could hardly bring about any fundamental changes in their mindset. Besides, he knew that enlightenment came from individual cultivation and not from a social movement, which mobilized its participants to shout out slogans and destroy any traces of tradition. This extreme was also the reason for the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution (1966-77).<sup>47</sup> When the Red Guards were mobilized to destroy the Four Olds (1966) namely, old customs, culture, habits, and ideas, were being pushed to extremes. They were shouting slogans of radical changes, yet their mindset, which was still so self-conscious about changes, did not change.

Commemoration and the politics of national identity are closely linked; so are memory and community. If a community creates and sustains memory, the reverse is also true: memory creates and sustains the community. The creation of a common past is a means of defining

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<sup>46</sup> Huang, 80.

<sup>47</sup> Cultural Revolution is “an upheaval launched by Mao Zedong to renew the spirit of revolution in China. Mao feared urban social stratification in a society as traditionally elitist as China and also believed that programs instituted to correct for the failed Great Leap Forward showed that his colleagues lacked commitment to the revolution. He organized China’s urban youths into groups called the Red Guards, shut down China’s schools, and encouraged the Red Guards to attack all traditional values and ‘bourgeois things.’ They soon splintered into zealous rival groups, and in 1968 Mao sent millions of them to the rural hinterland, bringing some order to the cities.”

“Cultural Revolution.” 2014. In *Britannica Precise Encyclopedia*, Encyclopedia Britannica. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica. [http://proxy.earlham.edu/2048/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/ebconcise/cultural\\_revolution/0](http://proxy.earlham.edu/2048/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/ebconcise/cultural_revolution/0).

what and who belong, and what and who deserve to be consigned to oblivion. Battles over memory are thus battles over how to draw the contours of community, who is to be included, and who is to be excluded from the community thus defined.<sup>48</sup>

The re-examination of Liang Qichao, therefore, reveals not only a new interpretation of his personality and ethos but also leads to interesting implications that offer new insights into both the present and the past. Confronting fundamental social changes Liang Qichao proposes and attempts to answer two crucial questions regarding the relationship between citizens and nation and the tension between cultural identity and global integration. The image of the New Citizen he visualized still has not been successfully realized. The tension between Eastern and Western learning he identified, we continue to confront today. Thus, Liang Qichao is not just an anachronistic historical figure framed into the context of late nineteenth-early twentieth century but a contemporary figure, whose argument holds significant importance for today's issues. Reconstructing Liang and his ethos, therefore, offers us not only extremely convincing arguments of an intellectual whose life was devoted to answering crucial questions we continue to face today but also an inspiring figure, whose spirits of impassioned civic responsibilities and ceaseless self-cultivation anyone can learn from, who wished not "to see a hero who fiercely outshines all others" but rather to "witness all of us become heroes for ourselves."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Hue Tam Ho Tai, *The country of memory: Remaking the past in late socialist Vietnam* (University of California Press, 2011), 227.

<sup>49</sup> Liang Qichao, *On the Age of Transitions* (Shanghai Publisher, 1901), 23.

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