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A CASE STUDY OF CONFUCIAN NATIVISM IN CHINA: LIANG QICHAO

WAS LIANG QICHAO A CONFUCIAN NATIVIST DURING 1898-1911 PERIOD?

PAPER OUTLINE:

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**Introduction**

In this paper, I am going to analyze one of the most preeminent figures in China contemporary intellectual history: Liang Qichao. Specifically, I am going to investigate whether it is possible to address him as an ideal Confucian nativist during the 1898-1911 period. This span of time represented the exile period Liang spent in Japan, which started with the failure of the Hundred Days Reform movement and ended with the proclamation of the Chinese Republic. In order to accomplish my goal, I consistently relied on Higham’s tripartite definition of nativism as based on the opposition to an internal minority, anti-radicalism, and the opposition to foreign religions. The primary sources used in this paper will be onLiang’s sketches for a new China. Moreover, J.R. Levenson’s *“Liang Qichao and the Mind of Modern China”* and Tang Xiabing’s *“Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity: the Historical Thinking of Liang Qichao”* constituted my point of reference throughout the research. However, my work diverges from these works since the focus will be set in ‘nativism’ rather than in ‘nationalism’*.* In fact, Tang’s work mostly consists in a reexamination of Liang’s emergent nationalist discourse of modernity in turn of the XX century China, while Levenson’s emphasizes on the intellectual evolution of the reformer with little attention to his nationalistic attitude. In section one, I will explain Liang Qichao’ attitude toward Chinese tradition. In section two, I will analyze “Renewing the people”, a text published in 1902 that deals with the construction of a new nation through the re-education of the people. Finally, I will focus on “On rights consciousness”, within which Liang decidedly demanded the introduction of the law as a source of authority to regulate every aspect of the new nation.

1. **Delving into the past to plan a brighter future for China**

Labeling Liang Qichao as a Confucian nativist by looking at his position toward Chinese tradition is all but easy. On the one hand, he was intellectually discontent with Confucian tradition, because it did not provide China with the means to overcome the challenge that the Western powers had put on the country, namely the self-strengthening of the nation. Yet, on the other hand, Liang could not transcend the bulwark of Chinese millennial culture, due to the inextricable attachment to his country’s heritage,

Liang Qichao promoted a scrupulous analysis of the Western countries to understand the reasons of their development. Throughout his juvenile career as a journalist, Liang strongly pleaded for industrialization, translation of books, constitutional government, and new school curricula enriched by the teaching of the Western sciences. Yet, during his exile period, we can see Liang as a relativist rather than an absolutist. In fact, according to him, implementing Western values with no regard to Chinese culture could not produce any positive outcome. Liang never reprimanded Chinese culture itself, but rather the spasmodic quest for a source of legitimization in the authority of the Classics. In his opinion, this was the trend among Qing scholars. Specifically, Liang asserted that:

“Snatching single phrases and isolated passages from ancient works and identifying them with modern ideas will very easily produce two kind of error: 1- It is fine as long as the ideas to be proved analogous correspond with each other in all respects, but if the analogy is forced even slightly, it will most probably lead our people into misconceptions, and explanation of new learning in terms of old sayings will only nurture the growth of errors; 2- Persuading people to implement a certain institutional reform by telling them that our ancient philosophers did it in the past, and urging them to study a certain subject by telling them that our early philosophers studied it, is of course a relatively easy way of introducing Western things… Unwittingly, this often strengthens the tendencies toward prejudice and complacency, and blurs one’s power of discernment necessary in selecting the right thing to follow (Liang, 104).”

Nevertheless, appealing to the authority of the Classics remained the key for his reform project, namely the creation of a society capable of planning a brighter future by delving into the ideal past depicted in the old scripts. Hence, to understand the way Liang approached the Classics we should look at his “*Intellectual Trends in the Qing Period*” (清代学术概论), in which he explained the divergences between the Modern Texts School and the Ancient Texts School. Liang defined himself as a vigorous propagandist of the Modern Texts School (Liang, 98). Scholars belonging to the Modern Texts School adopted empirical research to open new frontiers of learning. Thus, they studied the Classics with a different spirit from that of the Orthodox School, which committed themselves to classical study for its own sake (Liang, 91). Liang’s justification for the revival of authentic Confucianism arise in the comparison with the Western world. In fact, he maintained that the latter did not derive from the fulfillment of the Western tradition, but from the rejection of it (Levenson, 96). The Renaissance brought about a rediscovery of an ancient golden era, namely the Greek culture, through a new interpretative lens. Analogously, China had to get rid of the spurious tradition represented by the Neo-Confucian canon, because only a revival of the Han Confucian essence could bring about a prosperous future for the nation. He was so attempting to relieve his country from its worst disease: conservatism.

To heal from the disillusionment derived from his failures at “Westernizing” China, Liang started to look at his country’s fate through with new eyes. During his exile years, Liang progressively acknowledged that the real opposition was not between West and China, but rather it was between backwardness and progress. He strongly maintained that Western countries have modernized themselves, so what China needed was Modernization rather than Westernization. Chinese history, according to Liang, had to follow his Confucian course to reach the development that West had already experienced. Liang Qichao was conscious that if the Chinese did not reform their own laws, someone else from outside the Chinese world would have carried out these changes for them, since drastic changes became unavoidable at this particular time:

“The Western wind, one night, blows upon the man until is old,

Robs him of all his colors and leaves his-hair snow-white.

This man then turns to the Spirit of Hades, calling upon him to be his healer,

Calling upon him to cast the horoscope which will foretell his old age (Morgan, 316).”

Knowing this, could we deem Liang Qichao as a Confucian nativist? If we stick with Higham’s definition of nativism as based on an anti-radical attitude, the answer is negative. In fact, Liang was not conservative at all, as he urged great changes for his country by promoting a reinterpretation of the Confucian tradition through an empirical methodology. However, similarly, he was neither a radical. Liang, during this period, never disowned Chinese tradition, but oppositely struggled to preserve it. Yet, being conscious of the looming threat Western powers had put on China, he believed that his country should conserve what it already had, while grasping from others what it lacked. In his advice, transforming foreign borrows into Chinese concepts was the last chance for China’s survival. In his words: “If neglect the roots but tend the branches, it will be no difference from seeing the luxuriant growth of another tree (Lufrano and Bary, 229).” In conclusion, looking at Liang Qichao’s stance toward Chinese tradition from 1898 to 1911 we can address him as a Confucian relativist, because his thought lacked any extremism.

1. **New people for the Chinese nation.**

In order to determine whether Liang Qichao was a Confucian nativist or not, it is worth to consider his ideas about the Chinese nation. In this paragraph, I will analyze “*Renewing the people*-新民说”, a text published by Liang Qichao in 1902. In this text, Liang emerged as a humanist: his anthropocentric stance appears as shaped on Mencius’ idealogism. In fact, from the very beginning of the text Liang explained the concept of nation by highlighting the centrality of the individuals.

Primarily, Liang considered the nation as an organism and the citizens as its vital parts:

“A state is formed by the assembling of people. The relationship of a nation to its people resembles that of the body to its four limbs, five viscera, muscles, veins, and corpuscles. It has never happened that the four limbs could be cut off, the five viscera wasted away, the muscles and veins injured, the corpuscles dried up, and yet the body still lives. Similarly, it has never happened that a people could be foolish, timid, disorganized, and confused and yet the nation still stands (Lufrano and de Bary, 228)”

In these few lines, despite he did not express a negative appraisal of Chinese tradition, Liang maintained that it could not represent the only requirement to qualify Chinese people as citizens of a state. Although the value of citizenship was not necessarily superior to other characteristics, Liang continued, in an age of struggling between nations, China could not stand lacking a sense of cohesiveness, solidarity, and mutual understanding among people.

Secondly, through the observation of how other countries gained independence, Liang realized that the core reason of their success lay in the creation of a national identity. Accordingly, Liang discerned tribal people from national citizens, the former being people who form clans to live together to form their own customs, while the latter being individuals aware of the nation which actively participate in politics (Lufrano and de Bary, 230). Thus, looking at Western Liberalism as a model to emulate, Liang realized that without the creation of a citizenry endowed with a new set of values, such as a modern attitude toward the public good, his nation-building efforts would have been fruitless (Tang,21). It is possible to enclose Liang ‘s notion of national awareness into a four-tier definition:

1. **Being aware of the nation in relation to the individual**: in this passage, Liang confirmed that the nation is absolutely the most important form of aggregation for the people. In his opinion, the individuals could not only rely on themselves, as they needed to assist, protect, and benefit each other. What is peculiar in Liang, however, is that he did not extend this sense of belonging to all the human beings. In fact, while in the past Liang proclaimed Mozi’s conception of “universal love”, in 1902 he promoted a revised idea of loving the other. During his exile in Japan, Liang realized that without competition there could be no nation. Therefore, “universal love” might have served as a tool for Chinese people to strengthen their belonging to the Chinese nation: love had to be destined only to people sharing the same cultural values.
2. **Awareness of the nation in relation to the court**: in this point, Liang distinguished the love of the court from the love of the nation. Taking the example of King Louis XIV, he asserted that in Europe after the French Revolution is unthinkable to talk about a nation identified with its ruler. Then, he added:

“It is certain that a nation cannot exist without a court, and so it is necessary always to extend love of country to love of court…Those who understand the concept of the nation generally love the court, but those who love the court not necessarily possess the concept of the nation. Those courts are not established legally are courts that betray the nation. Only if the court is legitimized can one speak of love of country (Lufrano and de Bary).”

Here, Liang’s sketches for a constitutional monarchy emerged clearly. In fact, he did not denigrate the Chinese court; oppositely, he raised the monarch as a form of national identification. However, he urged the introduction of the law as a source of legitimization for the ruler in charge. It is interesting to notice that during this period Liang never expressed an anti-Manchu feeling. Actually, he maintained that as long as the law would recognize the authority of monarch, differentiation between Han and Manchus was unjustified. Probably Liang’s demand for the introduction of a law system derived from the admiration of the British Empire, which he regarded as the most civilized country in the world. In the third section of this paper, I will touch more deeply on Liang’s assertion of the rule of law.

1. **Awareness of the nation in relation to alien people**: as I briefly mentioned in point 1, Liang’s idea of the nation is framed in a “we vs them” dichotomy:

“The term “nation” appears in relation to the outside world. If the world consisted of just one nation, then the “nation” would not have been named. So “myself” appears when two selves stand side by side, “my family” appears when two families are adjacent, and “my nation” appear when two nations confront each other.(Lufrano and de Bary, 233)”

Liang believed that since people from different places were different both in form and substance as well as in spirit, the idea of a unified world was inconceivable. Oppositely, he held that people should develop a national feeling as based on common customs, the same language, and a uniform legal system. The surviving of the nation derived from the awareness of being a single entity opposed to similar entities. Consequently, Liang justified the struggle between nations as inevitable under the universal law of survival of the fittest. Overall, Liang expressed again a partial version of Mencius’ universal love.

1. **Awareness of the nation in relation to the world**: In this part of his explanation, Liang stated the oppositional character of the nation even more vehemently:

“Competition is the mother of civilization, and if competition ceased even for a single day, the progress of civilization would halt at once. Through competition, families arise out of individuals, villages arise out of families, and nations arise out of villages. Nations are the largest units of association and the peak of competition (Lufrano and de Bary, 233).”

Liang introduced a new and dynamic spatiotemporal regime to reconceptualize China as a finite *guojia* 国家(nation-state) rather than a boundless *tianxia* 天下 (all under heaven) (Tang, 14). In fact, nurturing a new Chinese nation was aimed at adapting China to the challenge of the modern world system of nation-states (Tang, 25). In Liang’s opinion, China could resist the foreign imperialistic threat only through the creation of new national values. Furthermore, the urge of creating a Chinese nation-state as opposed to other nation-states is justified by his ideas on the human nature. Liang believed that if the whole world would be united under the same flag, something inevitable would give rise to competition among compatriots, since competition was an innate characteristic of human beings. That being so, Liang promoted the concept of partial love and set the nation as its standard.

Overall, taking into account his plans to reform China, we cannot address Liang Qichao as a Confucian nativist. In my opinion, his sketches for building the Chinese nation are more than radical, for Liang shook the very foundations of Chinese society. What Liang promoted in this text is a reform of China’s social structure. Chinese society was based on the five Confucian relationship, which regulated all the aspects of the individual’s life, both in the private and the public realms. Specifically, three of these occur between members of the family: father and son, husband and wife, and brother and brother. According to Liang, love for the nation and the compatriots should be the highest value of new China. Thus, his “partial universal love” implied that people should overcome familiar interests to pursue national ones. Hence, Liang seems to implicitly suggesting that Confucian family rituals were hindering China to turn into a modernized country. However, Liang asserted that the most important of Confucian relations, the one between the ruler and his/her subjects, had to stand as the bulwark for the new Chinese nation-state. Yet, as Liang specified in his definition of nation, love for the king should no longer be an unavoidable value to obey. On the contrary, reinterpreting the classics by taking into account the contemporary issues of his country, Liang substituted Confucius authority with the power of law.

Additionally, Liang’s thought does not match the racial nativism analyzed by Higham. According to the American historian, one of three component of the American nativism was the differentiation between the superior Anglo-Saxon race and the others. Liang’s theory, reversely, lacked this ethnic element. Substantially, Liang never denigrated Manchus to a lower position in his ideal nation. Opposing the trend of his era to advocate Manchus as the main cause of China’s moral decay, Liang, during his post-exile, believed that the ousting of the Qing did not mean the elimination of bad government (Levenson, 160). Oppositely, he justified national homogeneity illustrating the equality of Han and Manchus according to same blood, same language, same living area, same customs, same religion, and same spirit. Moreover, Liang classified anti-Manchu sentiment as unjustified, because Han people would better blame themselves for having permitted a small minority to dominate the whole country (Levenson, 161).

In conclusion, considering his sketches about the Chinese nation, Liang Qichao could not be addressed as a Confucian nativist, since he appeared neither anti-radical nor ethnocentric.

1. **The sword and the scale: Liang’s right consciousness**

In the previous paragraph, I introduced Liang’s assertion of law. Here, I will analyze “On rights consciousness” 论权利思想, published in 1902-3, to clarify the centrality of the legal element in the new China devised by Liang Qichao. Liang opened his discourse emphasizing on the relation between the individual and the group:

“Not fulfilling one’s responsibilities to others is like killing another; not fulfilling one’s responsibilities to oneself is like killing oneself. If someone kills himself, then the group is decreased by one person (Liang, 14)”

It appears clearly that in the individual-nation relationship, Liang emphasized on the second element. Anyway, to what extent is rights consciousness significant in this relation? The introduction of this element in Liang’s thought was consequential to the study of the legal theorist von Jhering. Testimony to this, a quotation of the German theory appears early in the text:

“The goal of rights is peace, but the means to this end is none other than war and struggle. When there are mutual invasions, there is mutual resistance, and so long as the invasions do not cease, the resistance will also not end. The essence is simply that rights are born from competition…. Rights require unending effort. If effort is stopped even for a moment, the rights will be annihilated (Liang, 16).”

According to Liang, being endowed with a metaphysical existence people are greater than the other creatures. Rights (权利 quanli) represent the greater manifestation of this metaphysical existence. Subsequently, whenever an individual failed to preserve his or her rights, this would have signified a metaphysical suicide. Hence, given the indissoluble relation between the nation and citizens, whereas an individual lost his or her rights, the whole society would have died. (Liang, 15). Conversely, being committed to strengthening one’s own rights represented an unparalleled method to firmly establish the authority of the group (Liang, 15).

Delving into the ideal culture of ancient Greece, Liang referred to the goddess of justice to legitimatize his claims. Observing the divinity’s representations as holding a scale to weigh the right and a sword to protect the manifestation of rights, Liang recognized the essentiality of both the elements for his new China. In his vision, having a sword without a scale signified being wicked, whereas having a scale without a sword was to make rights without effect (Liang, 15). Accordingly, Liang judged law as the mean to survive in the constant competition among nations. Yet, he did so by referring to a foreign culture. Taking Higham’s description of American Nativism as the standard, we notice that Americans, similarly, made use of a conception devised in Britain, namely the superiority of the Anglo-Saxons over the other ethnic groups. Nevertheless, such borrow was justified by the firm bound Americans had with Britain. Oppositely, Liang investigated into a tradition that shared apparently no common ground with Chinese culture. Consequently, being the exclusive reliance on the indigenous culture one of the hallmarks of Higham’s definition of nativism, Liang Qichao could hardly be defined a Confucian nativist.

Another point on which Liang stressed on in his text is the difference between benefits and rights:

“If one covets the momentary ease of things before one’s eyes and is concerned with avoiding trifling inconveniences, one cannot but view rights as useless. This is precisely where the line is drawn between personalities that are lofty and pure, and those that are lowly and disgraceful (Liang, 17)

Under this respect, Liang fell into admiration for the English people as being the only civilizations to have attained full rights consciousness. Liang illustrated that the reason of British world dominance lay in their pursuing of rights rather than benefits. Furthermore, talking about the differences about Westerners and Chinese, Liang introduced a new antithesis: righteousness (义 yi) vs humaneness (仁 ren). As long as Chinese appraised a human government, Liang believed, the moral decay of his country would have been inevitable:

“If I manifest humaneness toward another, although this does not invade the other’s freedom, since it then makes me dependent on the other’s humaneness, I in effect give up my own freedom. The opportunities to act humanely are certainly many, and thus the instances in which I will be dependent on another’s humaneness are similarly many, and thus its abuse could well make people’s personalities increasingly base. (Liang, 18).”

Moreover, in the notes Liang specified that supporting the others with humaneness consisted in treating them as inferior. This claim built on his strong egalitarian attitude. In fact, Liang seemed to ask the reader: how could people who do not treat themselves as equal parts of the same entity form a competitive nation? Alike, hoping for human government from their lord, Chinese fell into submission in any case. In fact, Liang maintained that when people run into humaneness they are treated as infants, whereby they meet inhumanity, they are treated like slaves (Liang, 18). On the contrary, explaining rights consciousness as composed by both duties toward oneself and duties one should exercise toward his or her nation, Liang stated:

“If citizens cooperatively all exhaust their part of the responsibility to compete, then it will naturally be impossible for them to be invaded or oppressed. If there are people who try to avoid their responsibilities, this is as good as rebelling the whole entity of the citizenry (Liang, 19).

All people are endowed with rights consciousness when they are born, accordingly the reason why some nation are stronger and other weaker is determined by the government’s skills (Liang, 20). In this respect, the strong influence exerted by Mencius on Liang’s thought appears plainly:

“It is not that there were never sprouts on the mountainside, but cattle and sheep continuously graze there, so that it becomes barren (Liang, 21).”

In the last lines, he added that repressing people’s demands for rights the government was killing itself, because when its people are strong, one finds a strong nation; where its people are weak, one finds a weak nation. Thus, once again Liang reinforced the mutual reciprocity between nation and people, the necessity of a government elected by law, and the reinterpretation of the Classics with regard to contemporary issues.

In conclusion, we cannot label Liang Qichao’s sketches as Confucian nativist. Promoting a society devoid of class differentiation, Liang rejected the traditional social pattern based on the five Confucian relations. Therefore, a strong radical vein incompatible with Higham’s nativism marked his discourse. Additionally, drawing a line between rights and humaneness, Liang attacked the foundation of Chinese culture. This is also evident in his condemnation of the pedantic Confucian talk of humaneness, which prevented Chinese to mature their rights consciousness. Another strong point that does not allow us to define him as a nativist lies in his reliance on a foreign culture, with no visible link with Chinese tradition. Therefore, also analyzing “On rights consciousness” I did not find any hint to define Liang Qichao a Confucian nativist.

**Conclusions**

Overall, Liang Qichao was not a Confucian nativist. Analyzing what he advocated during his exile period, he is not consistent with Higham’s definition of nativism. Throughout the paper, even though I never dealt with the religious conservatism claimed by the American historian, I demonstrated that Liang’s project for renewing China was neither anti-radical nor ethnocentric.

The first finding of this research showed that Liang Qichao’s accusations were not directed to Confucian Classics per se, but to the spasmodic quest for a source of legitimization within them. In his opinion, Confucian scholars were unable to enrich the content of the Classics with Western knowledge. Therefore, giving a first look at his works, Liang appeared as a relativist rather than a radical.

However, Liang turned into a pure radical during his exile in Japan. In fact, in “*Renewing the people*” and “*On rights consciousness*” he shook the very foundation of Confucian tradition. Firstly, he claimed that in order to form a new nation Chinese should go beyond the societal structure based on the five Confucian relationship. More precisely, Liang rejected the rituals that governed the relationship between members of the family, and revised the one between ruler and subjects. In Liang’s opinion, family-level Confucian rituals prevented Chinese from pursuing national interests, while the latter made Chinese people unable to design their own destiny because the country was corrupted by an outdated source of power legitimization. Accordingly, he set the nation as the highest value of the new China, and introduced the authority of law as source of authority for the ruler in charge. No matter if the ruler were Han or Manchu, as long as he or she was entitled by the law, the emperor would have been a symbol of national identification. Being peculiar in Liang’s theories is the lack of any sign of opposition to an internal minority. In fact, opposing the common trend among his contemporary intellectuals, he never demeaned Manchus to a lower status. In his sketches for the new nation, being characterized by the same cultural heritage, Manchu and Han should have become a single entity, namely the Chinese nation.

Still, Liang is not a Confucian nativrefist because he shaped his nation by borrowing concepts from a foreign tradition, namely the Western world. American Nativism neither does stand on an indigenous ideology, since it is constructed upon British ethnological theories; however, if we look at the foundation of U.S. as an opportunity for UK to legitimize their ethnic supremacy, the comparison between the American and Chinese cases does not stand. In fact, on the one hand, we can regard at American Nativism as the perpetration of British attitudes toward ethnology, while on the other hand, we cannot find any nativist vein in Liang Qichao’s thought.

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