

Disenchantment: Liang Qichao's Post-War European Travel and Ideological Shift

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Abstract. Since the modern era, Western culture has acquired modern attributes due to its early industrialization. The political and economic systems of capitalism, and even its values, have become the aspirations of modern China. As a representative of the intellectual group learning from the West, Liang Qichao once regarded the Western capitalist society as the direction for China's modernization. However, the outbreak of World War I changed Liang Qichao. The various contradictions in post-war Europe and the perverse actions of imperialism led Liang Qichao to deeply reflect on Western civilization. He no longer looked up to the West but instead re-examined the valuable values of Chinese civilization, establishing cultural confidence. In fact, the shift in Liang Qichao's thinking is not an isolated case but a microcosm of the cultural awakening of the entire group of Chinese intellectuals learning from the West.

Keywords: World War I; Liang Qichao; Cultural Awakening.

1. Introduction

Since the Opium War, China has been forcibly integrated into the capitalist world market. Facing an increasingly deepening national crisis, Chinese intellectuals began to seek remedies from Western societies. Liang Qichao, in "An Overview of China's Evolution over Fifty Years," summarized the process of Chinese people learning from the West in three stages. The first was "initially feeling insufficient in terms of material objects,"[1] leading to the Self-Strengthening Movement. The second was "feeling inadequate in terms of institutional systems,"[1] resulting in the Hundred Days' Reform. The third was "feeling deficient at the very root of culture,"[1] leading to the Xinhai Revolution and the early Republican period's attempts at Western-style modernization. The failure of Republican political practices meant that "all hopes were dashed, realizing that applying old mindsets to new systems was impossible. There was a growing demand for a complete personal awakening,"[1] giving rise to the New Culture Movement.

Through Liang Qichao's summary, we can see that the "West," as a whole, was gradually accepted by Chinese intellectuals and even regarded as a utopia of perfection. As Professor Luo Zhitian put it, "Many Chinese scholars at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries viewed the West as a whole. At that time, all Western 'isms' were essentially seen as parts of this whole, and all were parts of this specific, newer, and better whole."[2]

In 1918, Liang Qichao, along with Zhang Junmai and others, traveled to post-war Europe. Regarding the purpose of this trip, he stated that "Firstly, I wanted to seek knowledge, to see how this war concluded, and to broaden my horizons. Secondly, in a personal capacity, I wanted to voice China's grievances to the world, to appeal to global public opinion, fulfilling my duty as a citizen." It is evident that Liang Qichao, to some extent, viewed this journey as a pilgrimage. However, after his European tour, there was a noticeable shift in his thinking. In fact, this transformation was not unique to Liang Qichao alone. As Liang Shuming noted, "China's trend towards Westernization receded quickly, becoming a thing of the past, and its turning point was during the First World War."[3]

2. The Shock of the Great War--From Darwinian Socialism to Cosmopolitanism

In the mid-19th century, Darwin's "On the Origin of Species" made its groundbreaking debut. It not only created tumultuous waves in the field of life sciences but also led to the rise of "Darwinian

Socialism" in the Western social sciences realm. This theory used "evolution" as a weapon to defend laissez-faire capitalism and imperialistic aggression. Around the time of the First Sino-Japanese War, this theory was introduced to China through Yan Fu's translation of "Tianyan Lun (Evolution and Ethics)." An intense sense of national crisis made many Chinese intellectuals fear that Chinese civilization would be selected out by nature. This accelerated their pace of learning from the West, treating "Darwinian Socialism" as the natural law governing human historical development.

As a pioneer in learning from the West, Liang Qichao was once an adherent of Darwinian Socialism. In his work "Xin Min Shuo (On the New Citizens)," he openly expressed his endorsement of this idea. He stated, "According to the general rule of natural selection, humans cannot but conflict with each other, and nations cannot but conflict with each other." He believed that the reason European powers dominated the world was their love for competition, noting, "The reason why European nations are superior to China is manifold, but their spirit of enterprise and risk-taking is especially significant." At the same time, Liang criticized Confucian ideas of universal harmony, seeing them as unrealistic utopias. He argued that if humans abandoned competition, they would revert to a primitive barbaric state, saying, "After achieving universal harmony, competition would instantly return, but it would be a competition among tribes, not among nations. This would drive all humanity back to barbarism." The factors supporting Liang Qichao's embrace of this idea included not only a sense of national crisis but also the success of the German model[4].

The unification and rapid rise of Germany in the late 19th century led Liang Qichao to believe that China could only survive intense international competition and escape the fate of natural selection by wholeheartedly embracing nationalism and promoting a Prussian spirit of dedication and martial virtue among its citizens. Bismarck, using his iron-blooded strategies, achieved nationalistic goals, calling upon his people, eradicating their old lax habits, and fostering an indomitable spirit. As the Kaiser continued these efforts with his martial prowess, expanding the nation's imperialistic aims, he decreed, "We must train the youth of our country so they are qualified to support our robust position in the world." As a result, German citizens became vigorous and proactive, making Germany the foremost military power in the world[4].

However, the brutality and suffering brought about by this war far exceeded Liang Qichao's expectations, causing profound shock to his beliefs.

Enemy soldiers advanced in waves over corpses through fields riddled with machine-gun fire, while defending soldiers calmly and jovially resisted under hailstorms of explosive bullets, resulting in both sides experiencing total devastation. In essence, humanity's beastly nature was thoroughly unleashed during this conflict[5].

Although residing in a top-tier hotel, we were constantly hungry. Sugar became an extremely rare delicacy, and our daily consumption consisted mainly of bitter tea. Coal was scarce, making indoor conditions bitterly cold. If this was the situation after the war, one can only imagine how it was during the conflict. It's evident that we, in the East, were wastefully extravagant every day[6].

The intensity of the war and the subsequent economic difficulties plunged Liang Qichao into a period of profound confusion. He lamented:

"Humanity's material progress in the last hundred years has multiplied many times over compared to the previous three thousand years. Yet we humans have not achieved happiness but, on the contrary, have invited numerous disasters. It's like travelers lost in a desert, seeing a distant large shadow and rushing towards it for guidance, only to find the shadow vanishing upon approach, resulting in profound despair[5]."

All these events led Liang Qichao to renounce his earlier admiration for Darwinian Socialism, believing that the root cause of this World War lay in the eight words: "survival of the fittest through competition."

"Ever since Darwin established the fundamental principles of biology and wrote his immortal 'On the Origin of Species,' he has been unparalleled in brilliance. His many words can be summarized in these eight: 'Survival competition, the strong prevail over the weak.' This theory, that it's the strong's duty to exterminate the weak and that it's necessary for the evolution of the world, was based on Darwin's biology and perfectly aligned with contemporary human psychology. Hence, from a personal perspective, worshipping power and gold became morally justified, while, from a national perspective, militarism and imperialism became the most fashionable political guidelines. This world war was precisely a result of this mentality, and future class wars within nations can trace their origins back to this mindset[5]."

In the winter of 1918, following Germany's defeat and China emerging as one of the victors of World War I, President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points led many Chinese intellectuals to believe that "truth triumphed over power." Liang Qichao briefly believed that China could use this opportunity to reclaim rights over Shandong. In February 1919, in a letter to Wang Daxie and Lin Changmin, he stated, "Upon my arrival in England, I heard that the Peace Conference had raised the issue of Qingdao. Having recently arrived in France, I learned that the developments here are largely aligned with our advocacy in Beijing, which is quite reassuring." [7] However, after observing the peace conference, Liang saw through the essence of imperialism. He likened this peace conference to the Vienna Congress a century ago, claiming that "history is but a copy of old texts." Despite Wilson's previous statements about "abolishing secret diplomacy" and ensuring "open peace talks," the actual proceedings resembled the old script of the Vienna Congress[5].

The horrors of the war and the dark dealings of the Paris Peace Conference made Liang Qichao realize the severe dangers of Darwinian Socialism and the filthy nature of imperialism. He no longer viewed the idea of a utopian world as a baseless fantasy but as a direction humanity should strive towards. Thus, even though he saw through the hypocrisy of the Paris Peace Conference, he still recognized the progressive significance of the League of Nations. He saw this as the beginning of a reconciliation between globalism and nationalism, embedding the idea deep within people's hearts that a nation's will is not absolute and unrestricted, but rather must be subject to considerable external constraints. The future should focus on building a "globalist nation," being patriotic but not narrow-minded, and establishing harmonious relationships between individuals, nations, and the world at large.[5]

3. The Wealth Gap – Capitalism is Not a Beautiful Future

During Liang Qichao's trip to Europe, in addition to examining the impact of the World War on Europe and the world, interacting with European academic luminaries, and speaking about China's grievances on the international stage, he also closely observed European society. He discovered that although the major European countries were powerful, there was a sharp contrast between the wealthy class and the working class. Workers led a life of continuous hardship, struggling to make ends meet.

"Ever since the invention of machinery and the rise of industries, there has been a significant change in the organization of livelihoods, giving rise to a new wealthy class. As science advances and factories increase, social desolation becomes more profound. The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. Prices soar daily. Living becomes more challenging every day. The wages workers receive are barely enough for food, clothing, or shelter. There is no time for rest or education. A few days of illness can strain an entire family[5]."

As for the cause of this phenomenon, Liang Qichao believed it was due to the laissez-faire capitalist economic system. He fully understood the rising worker movements in capitalist societies.

"The vast gap between the rich and the poor is partly due to the invention of machinery and the centralization of production. On the other hand, it's also because of the gold standard of liberalism in livelihoods and the result of free competition. Such a dire outcome would naturally evolve from this[5]."

"They wonder, we are all humans created by heaven, why should you live in joy while I suffer so much? Further reflection brings the realization: Where does your wealth come from if not from my sweat, adding to your wealth and fattening your body[5]?"

Regarding the various socialist ideologies popular among the western working class, although Liang Qichao believed China was not ready for a socialist revolution, he fully acknowledged its spirit. He thought that the spirit of socialism is not exclusive to the West but is embedded in ancient Chinese culture. "What Confucius spoke of, about 'equality without poverty,' and what Mencius spoke of regarding 'constant property and a constant heart' are the core arguments of this ideology." [5] As for the "October Revolution," which was slandered by imperialist countries as a catastrophe, he believed its historical significance was no less than the French Revolution.

"The Russian radical government, against all odds, has been established and has lasted two years. Regardless of its future, its spirit can never be erased. What was once ridiculed by many as an empty ideal has solidly become a system. Its historical value, at the very least, is no less than that of the French Revolution[5]."

As a critic of capitalism, Liang Qichao was not alone. Chen Duxiu, a founder of the Chinese Communist Party and a leader of the New Culture Movement, once dubbed Wilson the "world's first good man". However, by December 1923, when students of Peking University voted for the world's greatest figure, "out of 497 votes, Lenin received 227, ranking first, while Wilson received 51 votes, ranking second" [2]. This voting result aptly illustrated the shift in Chinese intellectual trends after WWI; socialism had become the new aspiration. In fact, criticism of capitalism and endorsement of socialism became a clear trend in Chinese thought after the First World War[2].

On the one hand, World War I seemed like a magic mirror, unmasking and revealing the various ugly faces of imperialism and capitalism right before Liang Qichao. On the other hand, the total mobilization during the war and the fervent worker movements in Europe led Liang Qichao to reconsider the path to save the nation. Ultimately, his conclusion was that to save China, it was essential to awaken the masses. To strive for national independence, one must rely solely on oneself. This is because in the international system under imperialist domination, so-called justice is merely a facade put on by the great powers.

"What is called justice and humanity is nothing more than a mantra of the powerful. If a weak country wishes to seek shelter under the banner of justice and humanity, it is utterly futile... The only thing we can rely on is ourselves. Only then can there be a glimmer of hope for the future [8]."

Liang Qichao believed that China's previous political failures were due to being disconnected from its people.

"In the past, the Constitutionalists were setting up their own constitution, and the Revolutionaries were revolutionizing their own fate, both unrelated to the citizens, like the froth that rises when opening a beer bottle. This goes against the principles of democracy. The failures of political movements in the past twenty years are all due to this. In the future, efforts should be concentrated on the entire nation, rather than just a select group of people for one's use, to achieve a true national politic [5]s."

He advocated for a new national movement, "Not a politician-style movement, not a local tyrant-style movement, not a gangster-style movement, but a movement that involves the genuine good people of the entire country [5]." After the May Fourth Movement, the face of the Chinese revolutionary movement underwent a radical transformation. The people's participation in the revolution grew rapidly in both depth and breadth, ultimately accomplishing the historical tasks of national independence and democratic revolution. This closely correlates with the significant shift in Chinese intellectual circles after World War I.

4. Cultural Alienation – Global Irresponsibility of Chinese Youth

From the above, it is evident that this European journey for Liang Qichao was one of enchantment, where a holistic and idealized West did indeed exist. While the capitalist industrial civilization produced vast material wealth, it also brought unparalleled prosperity to the people of the third world and the working class. The boom in technology and innovation not only diminished human capabilities in transforming nature but made wars more humane and compassionate. All of these prompted Liang Qichao to neglect the significance of Chinese civilization to the world, using the West to destabilize China and draining China with Western culture became Liang Qichao's primary cultural avoidance in his later years. Concurrently, he believed that Chinese youth have no particular mission; discarding China's exceptional traditional culture and completely embracing Western extremism is an obligation they can easily forsake.

Liang Qichao opined, "In the past, Western civilization always effortlessly integrated ideals with reality. Idealism and materialism, neither took extremes. Religious figures focused on this life; idealist philosophers spoke simply and relevantly to human life issues. Science was harmonious, and materialism was restrained, keeping lofty ideals intact[5]." To address this non-issue, relying on the West is quite easy, while Chinese philosophy is ill-equipped to handle it. Concepts like Confucius's "fulfilling nature and praising evolution," "persevering unceasingly," Laozi's "returning to one's roots," and Mozi's "being in line with the heavens" all underscored a unified sense of a greater self, a spiritual self, a lesser self, and a physical self, failing to see the bigger picture through the smaller lens. If we diverge from the paths of these sages, seeking 'a dissonance between modern ideals and practicality', I doubt how many paradigms can be overlooked[5].

He discouraged the people from embracing various modern European ideologies.

We must also realize that what we call new thoughts are, in many parts of Europe, already outdated, easily refuted. Even if they genuinely are innovative, we can't say 'new' is synonymous with 'false'. We should recognize that the intellectual realm of the West is still in a state of clear progression. They are blindly navigating in search of enlightenment, with many pioneers aiming to exclude Chinese and Indian civilizations, striving for a discord between the East and West. This immense task, fortunately, might be ours to neglect[5].

Although Liang Qichao was thoroughly disillusioned with Darwinian socialism and capitalism, and was resolute in his conviction to promote his country's culture, it doesn't mean that he adopted a dismissive attitude towards all Western cultures. On the contrary, he continued to encourage and support the study of Western knowledge, aiming to refine Chinese scholarship and spirit by "discarding the coarse and preserving the refined, eliminating falsehood and retaining truth."

Many visionaries are trying to integrate Chinese and Indian civilizations, striving for a balance between East and West. Our youth will have to shoulder this great responsibility for all of humanity in the future. The current preparation starts with studying Western thought. Firstly, because their research methodologies are precise and should be adopted by us. Secondly, because their intellectual emancipation has a long history and their ideological content is rich, offering a multitude of reference points. However, while we should study ardently, blind obedience is to be avoided. We should critically analyze various doctrines, both ancient and modern, from China and abroad, and use them as evidence to aid our judgments [5].

Liang Qichao insisted on achieving a harmonization between Chinese and Western cultures. He emphasized several points: First, "everyone should harbor sincere respect and care for their national culture". Second, "we should use Western research methods to investigate and discover their truths". Third, "integrate our own culture and complement it with others to form a new cultural system". Fourth, "expand this new system so that all of humanity can benefit from it". It's clear that by this time, Liang Qichao possessed ample cultural confidence, believing that Chinese civilization, after integrating advanced Western cultural elements and reforming itself, would make significant contributions to global civilization.

In 1920, Liang Qichao concluded his European journey and returned to his homeland. He withdrew from the political arena, where he had been active for a long time, and instead focused on the development of cultural and educational endeavors. As for why Liang Qichao made this choice, Zhang Yinlin offered an explanation.

"After the end of the European war, the Western intellectual class, following this unprecedented destruction, was in shock and dismay, clueless about what to do next. In extremities, things tend to reverse, so they shifted their attention to the East, which they had previously despised and never truly understood, thinking it might contain boundless treasures. It was during this time that Mr. Liang traveled to Europe, and under its influence, he firmly believed that ancient Chinese scriptures contain remedies that could heal both the West and ourselves. Upon his return, he committed himself to promoting Chinese culture [8]."

5. Conclusion

In summary, the outbreak of World War I had a profound impact on the intellectual circles of China at the time. As a key figure in China's intellectual and political domains, Liang Qichao's views underwent significant transformation after his European tour. This war prompted Chinese intellectuals to reevaluate the capitalist world of the West. They realized that the once-perceived perfect and idealized Western utopia no longer existed. In its place was an industrial behemoth that, while possessing advanced material civilization, brought immense catastrophe to humanity.

All these developments compelled Liang Qichao and other enlightened individuals to critically reflect on Western civilization and reconsider China's future trajectory. Subsequently, the Chinese society fully recognized the malevolent nature of imperialism and the adverse societal effects of laissez-faire capitalism. This realization paved the way for socialism to swiftly become the predominant ideology studied in Chinese society post-May Fourth Movement, leading China towards a brighter path tailored for itself.

Simultaneously, this most intense war in human history prompted Chinese intellectuals to take a fresh look at traditional Chinese culture. This, to some extent, counteracted the excessive criticisms directed at Chinese traditional culture during the early phase of the New Culture Movement. It safeguarded the treasured gems of Chinese civilization that had been nurtured over thousands of years and spurred the development of academic research in Sinology (the study of Chinese classical scholarship).

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