HISTORIOGRAPHY
EAST & WEST

Old Myth into New History:
The Building Blocks of Liang Qichao's "New History"

Peter Zarrow
Institute for Modern History
Academia Sinica, Taiwan

Keywords:

Chinese historiography; Liang Qichao; late Qing; evolutionism; sage-kings; nation.

Abstract:

In the first years of the twentieth century, the prominent radical intellectual Liang Qichao argued that China needed a "new history" that would constitute a history of the "nation" rather than court annals. This history would be evolutionary, and Liang rooted the origins of the Chinese people in the ancient myths of sage-kings. Liang mapped stages of progress (from primitive tribal forms of social organization to feudal-aristocratic to the centralized monarchy) onto Huang Di (the Yellow Emperor), Yao-Shun, and Yu. Both the "three ages" theory of the New Text school and social Darwinism provided Liang with a universal framework for explaining the course of Chinese history, but he faced difficulties in explaining why Chinese and European history were different. Liang's attitudes toward the Qin unification were particularly ambivalent: on the one hand it represented a progressive step at the time but

on the other it prevented later development. Liang's early histories emphasized China's originary moment, based on his reworkings of the sage-king myths. What made China historically distinct, however, was its early shift to centralized monarchy – whether seen in Yu's founding of the Xia dynasty or the later Qin unification – and its "failure" to further progress.

Liang transferred sacrality from the sage-kings to the nation itself. In this sense the sage-kings were desacralized, demoted from their positions as culture heroes and founders of civilization to representatives of stages of historical development. For Liang, historical development was based on objective factors such as geography and the struggles between competing groups. However, the Chinese nation was defined most clearly through a process of political unification, and this unification in turn partly depended on human decisions. In any case, Liang defined historical progress largely in terms of the development of the polity. China's failure to develop beyond imperial forms and monarchism to the nation-state and democracy could be excused. After all, the nation-state and democracy were new in Europe as well. Liang also emphasized that China's historical success had meant it faced few competitors; without competitors, it could not develop. For Liang, this was a particular worry because it left the Chinese people politically immature. Unchallenged, the monarchy could and did deprive the people of their freedom, their rights, and even their sense of civic duty. Liang's great project of the late Qing years thus became the creation of the "new citizen." Nonetheless, we cannot conclude that his historiography was simply a coded form of political propaganda. Rather, his historical and political views influenced and reinforced one another.

Liang's contributions to modern Chinese historiography have long been acknowledged. His historiographical project, however, was beset with tensions. Liang could reconcile his faith in progress with a reality of stagnation (as he saw it) only with difficulty. Liang also wrestled with the contradictions between determinism and voluntarism. And by turning the "nation" into the subject of history, Liang had to wrestle with the problems of defining that nation, of discovering what was new and old about it and what marked its continuity through time, and of determining what properties it held in common with other nations (universal traits) and what properties made it distinct (particular traits). In the end, much of what made China unique, for Liang,

was a kind of byproduct of its movement through universal historical stages. He destroyed the myth of a golden age, but valorized the evolution of the Chinese nation. Using many of the building blocks of the old myth-history, Liang provided a new narrative structure for the Chinese nation.

關鍵字：

中國史學、梁啟超、晚清、進化論、聖王、民族。

摘要：

在二十世紀初期，著名的激進知識份子梁啟超主張，中國需要一套「新史學」來記載民族的發展，而非官樣的編年史書。這「新史學」乃以進化論為基調，梁啟超將中國民族的起源扎根於遠古的聖王迷思。梁啟超將歷史進化階段（從原始部落型態的社會組織進化到貴族封建，再到集權帝制）與黃帝、堯、舜、禹等不同時代作了應對。今文學派的「三世論」與社會達爾文主義提供了梁啟超一個普世架構來解釋中國的歷史過程，但他在解釋中國與歐洲何以會有不同歷史發展時卻遭遇困難。梁啟超對秦朝之大一統，特別存有模稜兩可的矛盾態度：一方面，大一統在當時象徵著歷史的進步；但另方面，卻也滯阻了後續的發展。梁啟超早年基於對聖王迷思所翻寫的歷史撰述，強調中國起源的時刻。然而，中國歷史之所以特異不同，即在於它很早便轉向集權帝制（不論是指禹所建立的夏朝或是後來秦朝的大一統）以及它在進化發展上的「挫敗」。

梁啟超將神聖崇拜的對象從聖王轉移至國家民族之上。此意味著聖王的世俗化，從其作為文化英雄和文明開創者之地位降為歷史發展中階段性的代表人物。對梁啟超而言，歷史之進化發展有賴於客觀因素，如地理環境和族群間之競爭。不過，中國民族是經由政治統一的過程才被明確地界定，而此政治統一仍部分有待依賴人為的決定。無論如何，梁啟超主要是以政治的進化發展來定義歷史的進化發展。中國無法從帝國統治形式和君主政體向前發展為民族國家和民主政體一事，似乎言之成理，畢竟民族國家與民主政體在歐洲也是新興之物。梁啟超同時也強調，中國歷史延綿不絕表示它面臨較少的競爭對手；沒有競爭對手，它就無法進化發展。對梁啟超而言，這是一個關鍵的隱憂，因為這樣會讓中國人民在政治上無法成熟地發展。中國在沒有其他的挑戰下，其君主政體就可以而且是事實上也真的剝奪了人民的自由、權利，甚至於他們對公民義務的認知。梁啟超在清朝最末幾年裡所醞釀推行的大計，便是在於創造「新民」。雖說如此，我們也不能遽下斷論，以為他的歷史學不過是替政治作宣傳的借用手法。毋寧說他的歷史觀與政治觀彼此影響且相輔相成。

梁啟超對現代中國歷史學的貢獻長久以來受人肯定。然而他的史學計畫充滿著各種緊張性。梁啟超或可將他對歷史進步的信念與他所看到的停滯的歷史事實加以調和，只不過會有困難。梁啟超亦需用心對付「決定論」和「唯意志論」之間的衝突。將「中國民族」轉化為歷史的主體，梁啟超便必須應付這些問題：界定中國民族、發掘中國民族的新舊特性並標定其發展的連續性、以及決定中國民族有何與其他民族共通的特性（即其普遍性），又有什麼使它有別於其他民族的（即其特殊性）。最後，對梁啟超而言，大多使中國與眾不同的東西是中國在通過無可避免之歷史進化階段時的一種副產品。他摧毀了黃金時代的迷思，但從而確保了中國民族的進化過程。梁啟超運用許多古老歷史迷思為建材，為中國民族砌造了一個新的敘事架構。

* * *

In 1902, in his new journal *New People's Miscellany* (*Xinmin congbao* 新民叢報) Liang Qichao 梁啟超 published two essays that called for a new understanding of history and offered a sketch of what such a history might look like. His "Introduction to Chinese History" (Zhongguoshi xulun 中國史敘論) and "New historiography" (Xin shixue 新史學), along with several other early essays, have generally been treated by later scholars as China's turning point from "traditional" to "modern" history-writing. Recent studies have emphasized the pivotal importance of these essays.[1] In this, they are following Liang's own sense of breaking with the past. Liang's condemnation of dynastic histories, his denial that history could be reduced to the actions of a few ruling families, his insistence on an evolutionary approach to the development of the entire nation, his emphasis on causality and putatively universal patterns, and his call for a study of society-wide change all marked a conscious effort to do an entirely new kind of history.

Liang did not merely issue programmatic statements about how to do history; he attempted to write new histories.[2] Beginning at the beginning, Liang did not abandon the traditional "sage-kings" (*shengwang* 聖王) but rather mapped his evolutionary scheme onto them, describing a historical progress from primitive to civilized and thereby defamiliarizing Yao 堯, Shun 舜, Yu 禹, Huangdi (the Yellow Emperor 黃帝) and other progenitors of the Chinese people. Yet, if defamiliarized, they remained great men, and Liang thus left much of the mythic origins of Chinese civilization in place. In Liang's hands, the great deeds that created (Chinese) civilization were in a sense relativized, or at least placed in a historical rather than quasi-timeless framework. Yet they remained great deeds. Liang thus desacralized the founders of the civilization/nation but simultaneously gave them new significance in terms of their historical roles. To an extent, it was the "nation" that was now sacralized, but this was a far from seamless project. Liang's new

[1] See inter alia Xu Guansan 1989, Cheng Feng 1993, Huang Minlan 1994, Wang Yeyang 1994, Duara 1995, X. Tang 1996, Wang Fansen 2001, and E. Wang 2001.

[2] This essay focuses on Liang's writings of the 1890s and early 1900s, and does not consider Liang's rather different, later historiography – for which see Huang Jinxing 1997, E. Wang 2001: 103-111. Though he never wrote a full-scale history, from 1919 to 1923 Liang published a series of theoretical articles that cast doubt on his earlier evolutionism and attacked the positivism then popular. But however influential these articles, they were not path-breaking in the sense of his earlier essays.

history was explicitly designed as the evolution of the Chinese nation, and his criticism of earlier histories rested on the premise that the proper subject of historical narrative was the nation. Liang thus faced the problem of defining "China" before he could write its history. If, on the other hand, Liang hoped that a definition of China would emerge out of its history, he still had to begin somewhere.

Liang sought to understand what we might call an "originary moment" in (or rather, for) Chinese history. This is not to deny that he was interested in change and development; Liang did not trace everything back to essential origins. Nonetheless, his basic technique was to apply universal laws of historical development to the originary moment. If the same laws applied to the development of all different groups, then, logically, their distinct qualities derived from their original conditions. Liang thus essentially combined a universal historical methodology with an appreciation for different outcomes. The questions that lay behind his studies were: What factors made China different? And exactly how (and why) did historical progress lead to the formation of the nation? What, then, was Chinese about the history of China?

As is well known, Liang's early historiography was based on a particular form of naturalistic evolutionism, derived from both the New Text Confucianism developed by Kang Youwei 康有為 and the social Darwinism that Liang learned from Yan Fu 嚴復 and Japanese sources.[3] Evolution of a subject naturally had to begin with the origins of that subject, whatever it was. Part of Liang's concern with the originary moment of China can be explained in terms of the imperatives of nationalism.[4] Emplotting the nation in the narrative mode of Enlightenment history creates a sense of the national subject moving through time, giving the historian the tasks of pointing forward to modernity and backward to the "primordial subject". The "nation" is simultaneously new and old. That is to say, the nationalist argument rests on both the proposition that the nation is young, strong, and vital and the proposition that its roots or the germ of its being are ancient, if not eternal.

---

[3] H. Chang 1971: 64-66, 157-219f, Zhang Pengyuan 1982: 28-45, Pusey 1983: 89-112, Huang Jinxing 1997: 264-268, Mori Noriko 1999: 208-214. For the origins of modern Chinese linear views of time, see Kwong 2001.

[4] Tang 1996: 73-79, Duara 1995: 27-36.

However, Liang was doing more than turning the Chinese nation into the primary historical subject. The implications of evolutionism were uncomfortable for the nationalist project. Its universalistic pretensions (mythology?) left little room for national particularism, and the unknowability of the future that it posited jarred with nationalist confidence – raising the possibility of degeneration and extinction. Liang's eventual abandonment of evolutionism may, in part, be attributed to these difficulties, though of course sheer disillusionment with the West was also important. Yet it is critical to note that, even if, as Hao Chang maintains, by the beginning of the twentieth century Liang valued the nation as the highest good,[5] the nation was never Liang's sole value. The universalistic implications of evolutionism suggested the possibility of a cosmopolitanism not currently realizable. Liang was thus engaged in a project fraught with tensions.

On the one hand, if history followed universal patterns of development, then cultural particularities seem trivial. Did the originary moment create China or a kind of pre-China? If the latter, then when did China become China? On the other hand, to write a national history demanded that the entire unfolding of Chinese history be explained. Was this to consist of the mechanical application of universal laws of development or the tracing of a unique trajectory? Liang's first step was to dismiss as non-historical (*wushi* 無史) much of what had passed for "history" in the preceding eras. Although he gave different definitions of history, Liang's main point was simply that the history of China could not be reduced to the doings of the court. Since China belonged to the people (*guomin* 國民: nationals, citizens), its history had to be their history. In this way, Liang could claim that China was a young nation,[6] since its real history could only begin with the birth of national consciousness. This was also a history specifically designed to promote national feeling; indeed, without the right kind of history, "our nation cannot be saved".[7] Yet in practice Liang remained vitally interested in the most ancient period, if only because it failed to create the conditions necessary for the emergence of national consciousness.

---

[5] Chang 1971: 155-158.
[6] Liang 1996h: 9-10.
[7] Liang 1996k: 7; see Huang Jinxing 1997: 264-265 and Wang Fansen 2001: 18-22.

Liang's attitudes thus remained ambiguous, but whether viewed as a kind of prehistory of national consciousness or simply the embryonic stage of the institutions that shaped subsequent history, the ancient period was pivotal to him. Liang felt the necessity of origins not only out of his nationalist's desire to make Chinese identity eternal, or anyway ancient. As well, the very question of collective identity demanded an accounting of the emergence of the group, marking it as different from other groups. However much illegitimate records of its courts marked Chinese historical accounts, these accounts provided a description of origins – origins that have preoccupied much historical and archeological attention throughout the twentieth century. Finally, the story of China could not begin in a vague way with late Qing 清 awakening, for this very awakening had to be highlighted and explained.[8] If this awakening was to be attributed, even merely in part, to the stimulus of European nationalism or "national imperial", perhaps nationalist pride demanded that it be provided with native roots. More immediately, the logic of the national body demanded an understanding of its nature before it was awakened.

In describing the origins of China, then, Liang was brought back to the hazy ancient period and the stories of sage-kings. But who were the sage-kings: primitive tribal leaders or great inventors of civilization? If the latter, why did the pace of progress slow down (or reverse) after the era of the sage-kings? While Liang did not romanticize them or turn them into harbingers of democracy as some contemporary intellectuals were doing, he did turn them into symbols of evolutionary progress. Essentially he argued that they represented stages of Chinese civilization that followed universal patterns of development, such as tribal society, feudal-aristocratic politics, and so forth. The sage-kings were less comparable to post-Qin 秦 emperors, remarkable for their individuality (and selfishness), and more amenable to adoption as symbols of the nation or *guomin*. In using the sage-kings to support his argument, Liang can be seen as engaged in a traditional practice. The sages had originated as projects of the various ancient schools, and in a sense Liang can be seen here as the heir of the ancient philosophers.[9] Nor, indeed, was there anything particularly new about Liang's calls for history to

[8] For the trope of awakening, see Fitzgerald 1996.
[9] Lewis 1999: 123-129.

be of use.[10] Still, it is especially ironic that the need to create a populist history of the Chinese people (or, following Liang, "race") led back to the traditional models of imperial authority, the sage-emperors. Perhaps this represented the lack, at the beginning of the twentieth century, of alternative building blocks for the construction of Chinese national history. At any rate, it certainly raised new problems for Liang, particularly how to fit the period from the Qin (221 BC-) through the Qing into a progressive scheme, given the putatively historical accomplishments of the sage-kings and a subsequent stagnation.

New Text Progressivism and Evolution

The key feature of Liang's naturalistic evolutionism was the sense that progress could not be explained by reference to virtue, much less fate, but operated entirely through natural laws. He did not doubt, however, the progressive nature of history, which resulted in some form of (ever) higher civilization. The sense of time that lay at the heart of this view was created by Kang Youwei in his celebrated theory of the "Three Ages" (*sanshi* 三世). Basing his view of "Confucius as a reformer" (*Kongzi gaizhi* 孔子改制) and as a "king of institutions" (*zhifa zhi wang* 制法之王) on the New Text school's mystical adulation of Confucius, Kang proclaimed that Confucius knew the past and foresaw the future through three ages.[11] The three ages represented a sense of linear progressive time but not a naturalistic form of evolution. As Charlotte Furth has pointed out, this "new evolutionary cosmology" linked new knowledge of "a world history encompassing a plurality of high civilizations in dynamic interaction with one another as well as with a 'barbarian' perimeter" with the notion of "a single cosmic reality."[12] It retained a moral teleology, though relativizing China's place in the world-historical dynamism. To this, I would add that Kang Youwei, for one, essentially took the subject of history to be a rather abstract form of civilization. His Confucius spoke not

[10] Huang Jinxing 1997: 265.
[11] Hsiao 1975: 41-189ff; Tang Zhijun 1984: 96-107, 153-171; Wang Fansen 1987: 61-208f..
[12] Furth 1983: 325.

for China, or not only for China, but for humanity as a whole. Furthermore, Kang's sense of the sage standing at the beginning of time acted to maintain an implied notion of return: although progress unfolded through time it had nonetheless been miraculously predicted and laid down. Yet Kang still represented a major break with views that minimized discontinuity, for his was a new sense of the progressive and inevitable *flow* of time that in turn finally separates the now and the future from the past. Whatever the value and significance of history, it could no longer, in this view, be a repository of absolute value (which is not to deny the possibility of valuing the unfolding of history as the process of becoming). Although prophesized by Confucius, change- through-time was largely secular, a reorganization of human institutions and customs.

Kang combined the Three Ages – chaos (*luanshi* 亂世), lesser tranquility (or rising peace) peace (*xiaokang* 小康; *shengpingshi* 升平世), and great peace (*datong* 大同 or *taiping* 太平) – he derived from the *Liyun* (禮運) chapter of the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) with the Darwinian evolutionism he learned along with notions of progressive history from missionary accounts and Yan Fu's translation of Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* (which he probably read in manuscript in 1895). Darwinism was of course to exert a stronger influence on Liang than on Kang, but conversely Kang's influence on Liang remained strong through the turn of the century. The naturalism of Liang's Darwinism (as, in different forms, much of Darwinism in the West) remained, as we will see, imbued with certain moral strains as well as the faith in progress itself (that is, change was not meaningless in its own terms). Kang's Confucius did not, in fact, live at the beginning of the Three Ages but in their middle. For Kang, the ancient sage-kings still represented the actual origins of civilization. Indeed, at one point he stated that humanity flourished at the time of King Yu. But it was Confucius who outlined the ideal political institutions associated with the mythical ancient sage-kings.[13] The point here is not that Kang was arbitrary in his readings of the Classics and his interpretations of historical facts, nor that he was inconsistent.[14] Rather, Kang understood that the sage-kings and the kingly way existed in their own right but also that they reached culmination in the form of Confucius, the "uncrowned king" (*suwang*

[13] Kang Youwei 1958.
[14] Wang Yeyang 1994:204-208.

素王). Kang was thus rewriting accepted origin stories by making Confucius himself the founder of a Teaching (along with others, who had their own Teachings), in distinct opposition to the view that Confucius was merely a transmitter and the Six Classics primarily historical records.

In this scheme, Kang essentially posited a new originary moment. There was an ancient and shadowy time before Confucius, but this was a semi-organized society (still in the age of chaos); Confucius created order or, in Kang's terminology, "rising peace". For Kang as for earlier Chinese scholars a high degree of political and social organization (*zhi* 治), not the appearance of humanity itself, was what mattered. Furthermore, Kang even cast doubt on what could be known about the earliest period, since, he implied, our knowledge of it comes from the Six Classics, which Confucius designed to institute progress ("reform"), not convey historical data as such. If this line of thought had been more systematically pursued, perhaps Kang would have written the mythical legends out of Chinese history entirely. That was not, of course, his purpose, but the real originary moment for Kang, to which he attributed (Chinese) civilization in the modern sense of the term, revolved around Confucius, whose persona was highly mystical indeed:

> Heaven having pity for the many afflictions suffered by men who live on this great earth, [caused] the Black Emperor to send down his semen so as to create a being who would rescue the people from their troubles – a being of divine intelligence, who would be a sage-king, a teacher for all the ages, a protector of all people, and a religious leader for the whole world [that is, Confucius]. Born as he was in the age of chaos, he proceeded, on the basis of this chaos, to establish the pattern of the three ages, progressing with increasing refinement until they arrive at universal peace.[15]

In effect, Kang treated the figures of the traditional sage-kings with historical skepticism, implying that Confucius created a myth of the three dynasties (*sandai* 三代) to promote his own views. At the least, the details of the systems of the Xia 夏 and the Shang 商 were already unrecoverable by Confucius's time.[16] Thus Yao and Shun (merely) *represented* democracy, the

[15] Kang Youwei 1958, preface (*xu* 序): 7; cf. Hsiao 1975: 107-108.
[16] Kang 1958: 1:1-2.

age of Great Peace, and human perfection for Confucius, Kang implied.[17] Indeed, Kang was prepared to begin human history only with Yu and the Xia dynasty, in the wake of the great floods (Kang 1958: 2:9). When Confucius appeared, he acted as a kind of de facto emperor by showing his and later generations how to create proper institutions. In this way, Kang ignored the traditional Golden Age (of the three dynasties) and replaced Yao, Shun, the Duke of Zhou (周公) and the other sage-kings with the single personage of Confucius. These notions possessed great force in the late 1890s (as well as arousing considerable opposition) and, in several forms, persisted through the 1910s.

Liang Qichao, Evolution, and the Originary Moment

Liang Qichao took his teacher's formula and extended it into a thorough critique of previous approaches to history. Liang's views changed, as is well known, in important respects after his exile to Japan in the wake of the abortive Hundred Days of Reform in 1898. Nonetheless, Kang Youwei had already given him a progressive, unilinear, and universal staged development scheme, to which he gradually added a Darwinian dynamic. As well, Liang's stress on the "group" (*qun* 群) was greatly elaborated and focused, more clearly than in Kang's case, on the nation. Indeed, as early as his famous "General Discussion of Reform" (*Bianfa tongyi* 變法通議), serialized 1896-97, already criticized cyclical dynastic histories for overemphasizing questions of orthodox succession (*zhengtong* 正統) and the actions of emperors – criticisms that he developed more systematically after 1900.[18] His historiographical critique was derived from his political views, which in many respects were critical of the institution of the monarchy.[19] Liang thus already had a glimpse

[17] Kang 1958: 12:283.
[18] Liang 1996a.
[19] Liang's political views at this time are explored in Zarrow 2002; see also Hao Chang 1971:100-107. While not entirely consistent, Liang argued that the monarchy represented selfishness (Liang 1996c, 1996d), and he used "grouping" as a kind of cosmological-moral principle to condemn the isolation of the monarch (Liang 1996e). In good New Text fashion, he even slighted the role of historical monarchs as institution-builders, giving credit instead to Confucius (Liang 1996b).

of writing Chinese history with the emphasis redirected away from the monarchy altogether.

Nonetheless, this was still but a glimpse, not a scheme already worked out. In tracing a historical process that exalted imperial power, intensified oppression of the people, and isolated rulers from their own ministers, Liang was using a notion of devolutionary rather than progressive time, but in any case was searching out historical processes that transcended the dynastic cycle.[20] At the same time, Liang deliberately used the dynastic cycle to argue for reform in claiming that the various dynastic founders established laws and institutions.[21] Through reform, he argued, the kingship would be renewed (*xinwang* 新王), and the Qing could even achieve a restoration (*zhongxing* 中興), a call that can be traced back to the 1860s.

On the one hand, then, Liang used a cyclical narrative to explain the historical past, a past that offered models and object lessons, heroes and villains, successes and failures. But on the other hand, he treated the historical past as utterly decadent when compared to an originary myth of the perfect sage-kings. Indeed, in a sense the past, at least since the decadence of the Qin, was not historical at all: not worth investigation nor even conceivably a foundation on which a better future might be constructed, but existing only to be condemned. At first glance, there seems to be a contradiction in Liang's views. One approach to history – examining the events of the past for lessons and inspiration – might be called more or less realistic; the other was moralistic – flagellating the past to show where history had gone wrong. In fact, the two approaches answered different questions and operated on different levels.[22] It might also be argued that at this point Liang was not interested in "what happened" in the past nor even much interested in the meaning of the past. Rather, history was merely one of the many arrows he was firing at his political targets. He did not deliberately try to trace the rise of the imperial institution in China's history but to criticize it. This is not to deny that Liang's historical understanding of the imperial institution, the political formations of various dynasties, and the personal and characters of various emperors

[20] Liang 1996c.
[21] Liang 1996a: 1.
[22] Cf. Chevrier 1987.

was quite sophisticated. Still, he was largely content with a sort of golden age myth that served his critical purposes.

That myth was, of course, deeply embedded in what we might call the Chinese historical consciousness – the sage-kings were understood as real if very distant and possibly unrealizable in terms of their moral perfection. Liang's faith in the sage-king myths rested ultimately on references in the Classics and other pre-Qin writings, buttressed perhaps by legends and stories with no classical derivation but made familiar through reiterated stories and legends. Yet Liang was soon to problematize this originary moment of Chinese civilization (or, simply, civilization) as he had problematized the "historical" dynasties. As late as the 1890s, then, the creation of civilization by the sage-kings was too obvious to be questioned. It was an assumption embedded in the entire systems of scholarship and culture, not a proposition to be proved. It may be relevant here that through the 1898 reforms Liang was critically concerned with China's cultural core: sages more than kings, the preservation of the teaching (*baojiao* 保教) more than questions of the nation-state.[23]

Still, in 1897 in another early essay, on the transition from monarchism to democracy, Liang mapped the New Text's Three Ages onto political evolution.[24] Here he was writing more as a historian, and little is left of the golden age. Liang posits a more naturalistic, even deterministic progressive through set stages that could neither be skipped nor rushed. The first stage consists of a multitude of leaders (chaos: tribalism and feudalism), the second of a single ruler (rising peace: monarchism), and the third of the people (*datong*: democracy). But how did it all begin? Military competition was the key, as crafty or stronger men rose to leadership positions in isolated state-lets. In China, this was the age of Yu and the multitude of lords (*zhuhou* 諸侯), and Mongolia, Tibet, various tribal peoples, and the natives of the Americas and Africa were still in this stage. In China, this stage next gave rise to the lose confederacy of lords under an emperor (*tianzi* 天子) in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. It was a time of great suffering, both because of constant warfare and because of the rulers' profligacy and expenses. Again, still

[23] Chang 1971: 112-119
[24] Liang 1996f.

following the Kang's New Text ideas, Liang posited that Confucius showed the way to the rising peace of monarchism precisely to ease the people's suffering.

This essay suggests that for Liang the sage-kings were less important than Confucius. But if Liang were to see Confucius as something other than a political prophet, then the sage-kings might need to be restored. Indeed, after he began his exile in Japan, Liang quickly moved in a more radical direction, and he left New Text scholasticism and Confucianism far behind, explicitly rejecting the Confucian Religion (*Kongjiao* 孔教).[25] Initially, perhaps, Liang's writings in Japan represented an exploration of new directions more than an explicit repudiation of his former creeds, but even that was soon to follow. One of the features most notable in his new writings was a reliance on the "science" of his day, or at least a resolutely non-mystical search for causes and explanations. Instead, evolutionism, sometimes Darwinian and always progressing from primitive to more advanced forms, formed the core of Liang's thought, as is especially clear in his historical references and historiographical essays.[26] The process of development for Liang, then, was largely foreordained; the historical choice for all groups (increasingly, nations and races) could be expressed in ruthlessly amoral Darwinian terms: develop or perish. In this scheme, the originary moment lost some of its previous importance, for ultimately all groups shared similar origins as, indeed, they shared a similar basic projectory of development. The distinctions among them were caused by geographical and other entirely natural factors.

---

[25] Liang 1996l.

[26] These features of Liang's thought are inseparable from his nationalism, as scholars ranging from Hao Chang 1971 to Xiaobing Tang 1996 have emphasized and as we will see further, below. However, Liang's naturalistic evolutionism was a powerful overarching belief in his own right, not simply an aspect of his nationalism. He explained various forms of "grouping" (*qun* 群) as natural phenomena; one may as well say that modernity as an expression of the natural flow of time led to Liang's nationalism as the converse: "Nationalist ideology not only made modernity a legitimate concern and subject of study for Liang Qichao but also formed the dynamic core of his historical consciousness" (X. Tang 1996: 35).

First Stages

Mapping Chinese history onto universal stages and using universal laws to explain history raised the problem of what was unique about China. What were its origins and when did China start being "China"? One would surely turn to the ancient period to discover the origins of China, but that period still had to be set in a larger developmental context. In an essay written in 1901 that has received relatively little attention, Liang based his treatment of the ancient sage-kings on this naturalistic evolutionary conception of history.[27] Indeed, as he himself said, it was ultimately based on geographical determinism; strikingly, Liang had here no use for human agency whatsoever. Liang's evolutionism was firmly universalistic: all societies (nations, races) go through the same progressive stages from primitive to civilized, with corresponding forms of political organization and freedom. Specifically, Liang poured cold water on attempts to associate Yao and Shun with a putatively ancient Chinese set of "democratic institutions" (*minzhu zhidu* 民主制度). It may be said that Liang was often skeptical of attempts to claim "equivalency" with the West, even if he was not entirely immune to making such attempts himself.[28] In his 1901 essay he condemned the Europeans' theory of the putatively ancient virtues and freedoms of the "Aryan race" as harshly as he did the Chinese democratic mythology of Yao and Shun. Liang insisted that all peoples and races were free by nature. In ancient times, however, this referred only to a lack of restraints and hence marked "barbarian freedom". By way of contrast, "civilized freedom" was a recent product of historical evolution. Therefore, even if Yao and Shun had really abdicated their thrones, their actions occurred within a monarchical system. They were treating the country as if it were their private property, but they still represented a universal stage of civilization more than the origins of China.

Liang's broader goal was to demonstrate the principles of social evolution. These principles applied to all groups in given circumstances, creating four basic stages of progress (within which there were local variations). The key principle was competition and struggle between groups; continental systems

[27] Liang 1996j.
[28] Liang 1996d: 108.

were especially prone to this kind of struggle, which ultimately explained for Liang the greater role for freedom in island Britain and peninsular Greece, as compared with Europe, and Europe's greater freedom as compared with the larger Asia. As small groups succumbed to larger and more unified groups, centralized empires emerged. For Liang, historical explanation was thus rooted in objective and universal factors – not racial particularism – that in turn operated to create local differences. Specifically, the first stage of historical evolution in this scheme posited small groups, all free and lacking classes and ranks: the "age of barbarian freedom" or in China the stage before the emergence of Huang Di (the Yellow Emperor 黃帝). The second stage saw increased competition between these groups, which therefore needed leaders who, in turn, gradually emerged as a nobility: the age of aristocratic monarchy (in China, from Huang Di to the Qin 秦). In the third stage increasing struggles gave rise to greater centralization, and diffuse aristocratic systems were replaced by strong centralized ones: the "age of flourishing monarchical power" (in China from the Qin to the Qianlong 乾隆 Emperor). And finally the fourth stage firmly established sovereignty, populations were orderly, monarchical powers became more and more absolutist – which "developed" the people to the point they could claim their collective powers. This was the "age of civilized freedom" that China was now beginning to experience. Indeed this view of the monarchy was compatible with the 1898 Reform Movement's faith in institutional change and leadership from above as a prelude to eventual democratization.

Although Liang was obviously borrowing from Western ethnography, he applied this scheme to China in his own terms. His argument did contain anomalies. It is notable that he treated the eighteenth century (Qianlong) as a turning point, but the nineteenth century seems to have no place in these four stages. Whether Liang understood his own late Qing period in terms of the dynastic cycle, it was, of course, a period when central and monarchical powers degenerated and China became subject to foreign imperialism. This would seem to be the opposite of absolutism, and would leave the people dangerously *un*-developed: unprepared for the democratic tasks of the next stage (as the monarchy, for whatever reasons, failed to fulfill its last role), but Liang does not take up these points here. A second anomaly arises when the four stages are mapped on to Liang's argument at the beginning of the essay that it was precisely Yao and Shun who built a strong, centralized monarchy.

Perhaps this anomaly can be explained by understanding their achievement as occurring *within* the context of the basic aristocratic-monarchical stage – in other words, as a small evolutionary step within the larger framework. In any case, Liang is insistent on the point that ancient China was ruled by powerful aristocrats and clans. The abdications of Yao and Shun represented a system whereby the emperor was chosen by the aristocrats from the clansmen (tracing descent from Huang Di). They could also dismiss the emperor, which was deemed a perfectly ordinary act in this age; indeed, it was part of the system of selecting the most talented from among themselves. By the time of Emperor Yu, however, the kingship was passed directly from father to son. Liang concluded that Yao and Shun marked a transition from a purer aristocratic system to centralized monarchical powers. Imperial claims over succession represented a weakening of the aristocracy. However – though Liang did not spell this out – it must be presumed he understood this transition as still operating within an "aristocratic-monarchical" system (since the monarchical stage as such did not begin until the Qin). Such mixed aristocratic systems, he did explicitly claim, could be seen in contemporary Abyssinia, early Germanic kingdoms, and Spain in the Middle Ages.

> We can see from this that monarchical powers at the times of Huang Di, Yao, and Shun were nowhere near as great as those held by emperors in later times. Sovereignty was mostly wielded by the powerful clans, and if conflicts emerged between them and the emperor, the emperor was unable to impose his will.[29]

Liang nowhere doubted the essential historicity of Yao and Shun (or even Huang Di); he was skeptical of the stories of their "abdications", as we have seen, preferring to situate them in a more naturalistic setting – naturalistic in the sense that an understanding of historical evolution prohibited viewing them as either democratic in the modern sense or solely in terms of moral behavior in the traditional sense. Yao and Shun, in Liang's historical description, were not god-like rulers but ordinary, if talented, men doing a job in sometimes difficult circumstances, circumstances made difficult especially because of the limits on their powers. They could make no major decisions without the acquiescence of the major clans. In terms of historical evolution

[29] Liang 1996j: 26.

operating through larger, more complex, and better articulated groups (to impose a modern terminology on Liang), the rise of the monarchy over aristocracy naturally represented a progressive step.

It was the monarchy, then, that was distinctively Chinese. The origins of China as a unique culture lay in the rise of the monarchy for Liang. In an essay comparing China to Europe, he emphasized China's early move to political unity and the abolition of aristocratic classes.[30] These were of course linked in a single historical stage, that of a strong monarch managing a centralized bureaucracy. In this sense, the evolution of China was two thousand years faster than that of Europe. The most ancient periods of Chinese and European history were basically parallel, but they diverged from the Qin-Han. That this divergence led paradoxically to Europe's later more rapid progress in Liang's view is a point we will return to below. Here, the point is that Liang traced the germs of China's unification back to the most ancient period of tribal/racial conflicts and the clans of Gonggong 共工, Chiyou 蚩尤, and Huang Di. Struggles between the descendents of Huang Di and the Miao 苗 finally gave rise to the "three dynasties", which were descended from Huang Di. For Liang, the states of Xia and Shang basically resembled Egypt and Babylon in being a confederacy of tribal chieftains more than a centralized monarchy.

In this scheme, the fundamental breakthrough comes less with Yu, though he plays an important role in building the confederacy, than with the Qin-Han abolition of the enfeoffment system (*fengjian* 封建). Liang further pursued this idea in an effort to trace the rise of autocracy through the various historical dynasties.[31] But the Qin unification did not just happen; it emerged out of a long evolution. Huang Di, in particular was a great conqueror who defeated other tribal leaders and rebels. More to the point, he began to unify various tribes, thanks in part to his illustrious virtue (*weiwei weide* 巍巍威德).[32] By the time of Yao and Shun, the leader of this kind of confederacy was elected from among the tribal chiefs, which the ancient texts referred to as their abdications. The real unification (*tongyi* 統一), however,

[30] Liang 1996g.
[31] Liang 1996m.
[32] Liang 1996m: 65.

started with Yu, who increased the leader's powers and established the principle of hereditary succession. In this sense, the Xia and Shang periods represented a post-tribal polity, but one that had not yet stabilized in the semi-centralized, semi-decentralized enfeoffment (*fengjian*) of the Zhou.

The Historicity of the Sage-kings

These essays simultaneously looked forward and backward. Forward, to a debate about the nature of good government and democracy that Liang wished to create. And backward, in a tradition of discourse on centralization (*fengjian/junxian* 封建/郡縣), examined in the next section. Yet it should already be evident that Liang was also wrestling with various problems that unilinear historical development gave rise to. In his limited discussions of historical causation, Liang stressed objective factors like geography and the struggle for resources (which might be reducible to a view of human nature) that, apparently, operated at the level of groups. He thus tended to removed human agency from history altogether. This view perhaps does not represent his later opinions very well, but it correlated to another important position. That is, Liang was removing morality from history. If history was largely set in stages that all groups must follow (or perish), individual morality, if it existed at all, was irrelevant. So the issue was not Yu's moral failure in choosing his son to succeed him – contrasted to the morality of Yao and Shun – but his greater powers, a product, simply, of progress. This was, of course, a reversal of the traditional verdict, but from Liang's point of view he was not challenging the old morality with a new morality but removing morality from historical judgment altogether. Liang claimed that his goal was precisely, as a responsible historian, to illustrate the workings of evolutionary principles and recover a true image of past. Liang explicitly concluded by saying that, for their parts, Yao and Shun were not evil for extending imperial power: unification of the various small groups was a necessary stage in China's development, and stages cannot be skipped. It might finally be noted that Liang's was a functionalist view: not from their point of view but from ours, the purpose of Yao and Shun was to establish the monarchy (and not to develop democracy).

Yet a deeper problem stemmed from the universalism in Liang's new ap-

proach to history. It was not at all clear when "China" originated, as opposed to the ordinary developments on the land that happened, at some later point, to become China. This question masked a deeper one, one that Liang made no attempt to answer: why write a history of China at all? Why, exactly, should "China" be treated as a historical subject? Nor did Liang explicitly try to determine the origins of a distinctive China, though we may infer an answer. Did China begin in the era of "barbarian freedom" or after Huang Di, when Yao and Shun (partially) centralized the monarchy? Barbarian freedom would not seem to have culturally distinctive traits. This is confirmed by another essay, "Introduction to Chinese History."[33] Here, Liang briefly discussed both the origins of humanity and organized society in general and China in particular. Liang posited that sociology explained how humanity advanced through *three* stages. The first stage was of tribal chiefs loosely holding individuals together. The second saw great clans in control of government, their upper levels choosing the king and their lower levels managing the populace. And during the third stage centralized power was gradually consolidated under a strong king.[34] Again, the dynamic behind the transitions was outside threat and struggle. Also, Liang proclaimed that archeology showed another progress of the ages from stone to bronze to iron. Liang cited the ploughs of Shen Nong 神農 and the bows and arrows of Chiyou 蚩尤 as proof that China had already entered the bronze age before Huang Di.[35] The point would seem to simply prove the existence of progress. Liang did not attempt to correlate technological and political progress.

Liang treated the age from Huang Di to Yu and the founding of the Xia dynasty as China's pre-history: but a late pre-history. The prehistoric ages ended after the great flood(s) that affected the entire globe. In other words, in China's case history proper began with Yu's founding of the Xia dynasty, which marked the formation of a distinctively Chinese society and state.[36] Historical accounts before this point, Liang treated as unproved, though he did not doubt the sheer existence of the sage-kings from Huang Di on. In any case, Liang insisted, from Huang Di to Yu was but a few hundred years, just

[33] Liang 1996i.
[34] Liang 1996i: 10.
[35] Liang 1996i: 9-10.
[36] Liang 1996i: 9.

as from the floods to Huang Di was a relatively short period of time. Huang Di and his immediate successors, then, might be regarded as transitional from the completely primitive to the essentially civilized – in other words, from unorganized to organized society. Indeed, Yao and Shun, and the Xia, Shang, and Zhou 周 dynasties all traced their ancestry to Huang Di – the progenitor of all the Chinese people. Liang did not dwell on this notion, which was to become widespread and politically potent.[37] Huang Di was soon to be treated in genealogical and biological terms as the founder of the Han Chinese race, distinct especially from the Manchus. Liang's interest in Huang Di, on the other hand, was less racial and more cultural – that is, he treated Huang Di as the founder of what was to become a political community.

Nonetheless, while Liang scientifically distinguished pre-history from history, he left the mythic origins of Chinese civilization largely in place. He may have termed the early sage-kings "barbarian" but they marked enormous achievements. Liang also followed European practice in dividing history into ancient, medieval, and modern periods – again, expressing his faith in progressive development. Of greatest interest here is Liang's treatment of the ancient period from Huang Di to the Qin. He emphasized the theme of political unification over technological, cultural, or civilizational accomplishments.

> This was the age when China became China, as the Chinese nation (*Zhongguo minzu* 中國民族) developed itself, struggled among itself, and unified itself. Most significantly, the barbarian tribes were defeated as the powerful and their worthy ministers and kinsmen divided up the important territories, so tribal chieftainship became an enfeoffment system. More and more lands were annexed and conquest was unceasing.... Finally, with unification, the Han nation (*Hanzu* 漢族) was truly managing its own internal affairs. At this time there only remained intercourse with the Miao tribes.[38]

Liang thus captured a sense of China's relative isolation, though this was an isolation that emerged out of the success of internal unification. Liang may have taken it for granted that the "Han nation" was a kind of historical

---

[37] Shen Songqiao 1997; Luo Zhitian 2002.
[38] Liang 1996i: 11, cf. Tang 1996: 38.

given, but "China" certainly was not: it was created through struggle and, he strongly implied, created out of various groups, if not peoples or nations. This was the achievement of the ancient period. It was not the achievement of a moment, and in various essays Liang gave credit to Huang Di, Yu, and the Qin unification.

Let us briefly put Liang's ancient period in context. Whether he was citing four stages or three – or thirteen[39] – Liang equated historical progress with the form of the polity. Using a three-fold scheme he traced back to Montesquieu and Aristotle via Yan Fu, Liang regarded aristocracy, monarchy, and democracy not as ideal-types but as evolutionary stages. Citing Herbert Spencer, he added a preliminary tribal stage to this scheme, and he played with it in various ways. One version led to a long middle period, from the Qin to Qianlong, as monarchical powers were extended.[40] And in the modern period since the eighteenth century China was becoming part of the world and beginning a transition through absolutism to a more democratic order: a higher stage of social articulation. In another version, the enfeoffment system was key.[41] It was not established from Huang Di to the Zhou (the most ancient period) but was cemented in the Zhou. From the Han to the beginning of the Qing central powers waxed and waned with the reality of aristocratic and military rivals to the Throne (the reality if not the name of *fengjian*; finally, however, the Kangxi 康熙 emperor abolished enfeoffment once and for all.

Any theory of development through stages raises the question of how one stage becomes the next. Liang gave relatively little thought to this question, however. By turning the sage-kings into representatives of historical progress rather than great men or demi-gods, Liang seemed to be removing agency from history. We will examine this question in more detail in the next section, along with the related question of moral responsibility. If historical causation is explained in terms of geography and the struggle for resources, then there is no scope for moral question. Yet if evolutionism provides a normative framework of progress, progress becomes a new moral standard. Chinese

---

[39] Liang 1996m: 64-69.
[40] Liang 1996i: 11.
[41] Liang 1996m: 69-70.

could take pride that the sage-kings early fashioned an organized policy out of tribal struggles. They could take pride that their transition from feudalism to monarchism occurred long before Europe's. But they could not take pride that they had failed thus far to enter the next stage of democracy.

In this sense, Liang's progressivism was not very stable. When Liang was writing in a more moralistic or political mode, he sounded more condemnatory of what China lacked, rather emphasizing than what it had achieved. In his famous "Ode to Young China", written somewhat earlier on the eve of 1900 to celebrate the new century, Liang sought to position China as a *young* nation, since the old China was not a true nation-state at all.[42] As Xiaobing Tang notes, Liang was enjoying his cake and eating it too, or exhibiting a "Janus-like attitude toward both historical and territorial continuity," glorifying China's brilliant past while simultaneously insisting on its absolute newness as a nation-state.[43] But the point here is that this stance necessarily involved some distancing from the originary moment. Whatever the achievements of the Chinese "people" or "nation" during the long years of imperial rule (or suppression of the nation), Liang could only take partial satisfaction in them, for these achievements were tainted by their failure to create a full nation-state. What defined ancient China for Liang was what it lacked: called a nation-state (*guo* 國), yet it did not achieve national form (*guo zhi xing* 國之形).[44] Rather, the state belonged to clans, tribal chiefs, feudal lords, or the emperor. Indeed, Liang consistently implied that, given promising beginnings, something went wrong with Chinese history.

Monarchism and the Problems of Decline and Agency

> However, if absolute autocracy is not instituted, then how can the state be established? Thus if we look at the last several thousand years of history, what is called the era of Lesser Peace is precisely the most large-scale and stable era of the centralization of powers – such as the early Zhou, the early Han, the early Tang, and the early Qing. When autocratic powers

[42] Liang 1996h.
[43] Xiaobing Tang 1996: 38.
[44] Liang 1996h: 9.

> declined, the country was divided. When the country was divided, military forces rose to unify it again. Each reunification strengthened the autocratic system, which reached its apogee in the Qianlong period. We know that the failure of democracy is due to suppression by the autocracy, and that the success of the autocracy is due to the failure of democracy.[45]

But why did China fail to advance to democracy while Europe had succeeded? Why did China get stuck in the age of autocracy?

Here, we must return to the question of Liang's politics. To reduce his new theories about history to his politics is a mistake.[46] Liang's history-writing was not a form of political writing in code; rather, he was attempting an enormously difficult task: to reorder the traditional historical data into what he saw as an entirely new framework of national progress. Of course, Liang's views of history were shaped by his political concerns (history is never a perfectly a-political enterprise), and of course the very notion of doing history in terms of national progress was inherently political. Liang saw himself as an engaged scholar whose commitment to engagement shaped his scholarship – and vice versa: his history cannot be reduced to his politics, nor did he see the need to distort history for the sake of his politics but only to understand it rightly. In other words, we must try to understand Liang's historiography in its own terms. It is true, nonetheless, that tensions remained in his understanding of history, which given his ambitions should not be surprising. More to the point, some of these tensions can be traced to his political concerns. The most obvious of these is the contradiction between his judgment of the monarchy as a progressive stage on the one hand, and as a force for obscurantism and reaction on the other. Arguably, Liang might protest that monarchism was "objectively" a progressive step two millennia ago but that it persisted too long, delaying the next tick of the clock of progress. However, he never made such an argument explicit; rather, he veered between a basically positive evaluation of the monarchy in his historical essays, demonstrating his commitment to his new historical principles, on the

---

[45] Liang 1996m: 71.
[46] For which, see Huang Minlan 1994.

one hand, and a sharply negative evaluation in his polemical essays on the other. The dichotomy is not absolute, but it is revealing.

One solution was to insist on the fundamental equivalent of developments in China and Europe. Thus in "Ode to Young China" Liang pointed out that true nation-states had but recently emerged anywhere in the world about a hundred years previously (which made European countries middle-aged compared to young China). He also worked out an elaborate analogy between Chinese history and the development of an organism. The pre-Yao-Shun period was like an embryo; the Shang-Zhou period like a suckling infant; and the entire period from Confucius to the present like childhood. Thus was China on the verge of youth, though even here Liang admitted China's development had been unfortunately slow.[47]

Liang's basic faith in progress and the historical framework of stages that he used never made him complacent. He remained a sharp critic of China's faults in the present and in the past, often comparing the course of Chinese history unfavorably with that of Europe and Japan. However deep similarities the similarities between ancient China and Europe, feudalism led to a system of competing states that was continuous in Europe but only intermittent in China. This required European states to progress or perish, improving the quality of the citizens, and eventually enabling a breakthrough.[48] Elsewhere, Liang noted the different nature of feudalism in China and Europe, where local self-government and independent towns meant that the leaders of the emerging monarchies would unite with the people against feudal forces.[49] Since the two needed each other, European autocracy could not completely dominate the popular will. Something similar, Liang thought, had happened in Tokugawa and Meiji Japan, but the Chinese people had played no comparable historical role in either the feudal or monarchical stages.

Still, Liang also had positive praise for autocracy. He could not help noticing that the Chinese had been saved much suffering. Unity not only brought the disasters of warfare to an end but also strengthened the nation

---

[47] Liang 1996h.
[48] Liang 1996g: 64, 66.
[49] Liang 1996m: 70.

vis-à-vis others.[50] Monarchism was thus not only an objectively necessary stage that would, one way or the other, create the necessary conditions for democracy. It was a real blessing – the "Lesser Peace" – in its own right. On the other hand, it was also oppressive and decadent.[51] And worse: China seemed stuck in old ways just as modern Europe was leaping ahead.[52]

Given these fundamental differences, Liang might have abandoned the universalistic pretensions of his scheme of historical stages. That is, if the pattern of Chinese history did not in fact follow that of the (normative, universal) European pattern, in what sense did European history represent a truly universal pattern? But of course Liang simply assumed that while China had been early to end feudalism and was late to end monarchism, these still represented the only (unilinear) path of development. Unilinear development was thus, for Liang, normative. A nation was in some sense supposed to move through the proper stages of historical evolution; otherwise, something was wrong. Liang thus smuggled morality back into history, not as judgments on individual's actions but as judgments on the overall social condition. In the final analysis, Liang was prescribing as well as describing. He treated the nation-state as a good or a means to a good (this distinctions need not detain us here). This in turn created a dilemma: the very value Liang placed on the modern nation-state forced him to highlight Chinese historical stagnation. He condemned monarchical despotism as an obstacle to modernity, and so he had to see the prolonged imperial era as a tragedy.

At the same time, Liang tried to solve the embarrassment of the decline or what we might call the "what-went-wrong" problem, by emphasizing the necessity and historical function of each stage of development leading to the nation-state. This strategy worked to reinstate the importance of the originary moment, though in a naturalized rather than mythologized way. For the young Chinese nation-state could then reassume its position as direct heir of a continuously developing group-consciousness and complex political articulation. In the evolutionary mythology, Yao, Shun, and the others represented "embryonic" stages or the germs of future greatness. The developmental

---

[50] Liang 1996f: 8-9.
[51] Liang 1996g: 63-65.
[52] Liang 1996g: 66-67.

thrust of the ancient period was related to modern needs. The people then created and defined would now, in Liang's modern period, produce newer and higher forms of social organization.

Yet then the Qin-Han monarchy represents disjuncture, as much as evolutionary growth, for Liang. The proper next stage somehow turned into a detour on the road of progress. The continuity of Chinese history was less than whole, for the emperors had retarded the proper development of the people. Perhaps an inability or reluctance to deal with the political history of the imperial era prevented Liang from completing his long-proposed more detailed history of China. Certainly, the pointless repetitions of the dynastic cycle did not, as Liang explicitly made clear, represent history. The objective purpose of the imperial period – centralization – was carried out, at best, imperfectly. Liang praised the unity imposed (constructed? reflected?) by the post-Qin imperial system, but he also condemned it for failing to raise the cultural level of the masses. In the famous series of essays titled "Renewing the People" (or "New Citizen", *xinmin* 新民) Liang repeatedly attacked the monarchy precisely for turning the masses into immature political idiots who lost their freedom, their rights, and even their sense of civic duty.

Nonetheless, underlying Liang's sociopolitical "self-criticism" was a sense that the future would be better than the past or the present. Liang was not particularly drawn to utopian thinking, and, especially after drawing away from Kang Youwei in the wake of the 1898 coup, Liang suggested that the Datong might be millions of years away.[53] And at times, at least, he acknowledged the possibility of historical retreats as well as extinctions. Yet in the end, in Liang's historiography, humanity as a whole seemed doomed to progress willy-nilly. Indeed, a strong determinist streak runs through his historiography in this period. Progress is a natural law;[54] affairs move from simple to complex and bad to good.[55] One senses that if the strong nation was not a definition of progress, it was nonetheless for Liang the clearest sign

---

[53] Huang Kewu 1994: 114, among others, has pointed to Liang's anti-utopianism; however, in spite of what might be called Liang's "consciousness of darkness", especially the darkness of human nature, his faith in progress strikes me as essentially optimistic.

[54] 1996m: 59.

[55] Liang 1996f: 10.

of progress. However ambiguous his attitudes toward Chinese history (normal development or retarded, or even wrong turn), Liang insisted on using universal categories of analysis as a master narrative that encompassed thousands of years in a single "stage". China's lack of development in terms of unilinear progress from the Qin to the Qing, therefore, was unfortunate for the Chinese, but not proof of the inadequacy of this historiographical scheme. On the contrary, since China faced little competition over these millennia (since barbarian invaders were assimilated), imperial stagnation confirmed the theory.

It may be that in the rapid development of Liang's own views in the early twentieth century, one can trace not so much ambiguity as a deepening of *both* optimism and pessimism. That is, on the one hand, Liang came increasingly to appreciate how difficult progress was to sustain and how many the ways it could go wrong (not least because of human frailty), while on the other hand, he came to believe that progress was in a sense rooted in the cosmos, even if it proceeded fitfully and through the brutal extinction of the non-adaptive. For the other side of progress was not stagnation but extinction. This was, of course, a social Darwinian vision turned into a historical master narrative in ways foreshadowed by Yan Fu and repeated with alarming frequency by those who foresaw China's imminent demise.

Liang's sense of history as progress, then, was not entirely optimistic, since it did not promise progress for all groups or historical subjects. In his 1902 "New Historiography" (*Xinshixue* 新史學) Liang went beyond his earlier remarks to outline a more systematic approach to doing history.[56] Here, Liang emphasized the importance of the collective subjects of history: nations and races and their evolution. This might be taken to imply that an emphasis on individuals, even sage-kings, would be misplaced if it neglected the accomplishments of the group.[57] In fact, Liang could not entirely neglect human agency, since this factor necessarily played a role in determining whether a given race would be a "historical" race destined to dominate or a "non-historical" race destined to subjugation and eventual extinction. A

[56] Liang 1996k; for discussions, see Xu 1989: 14-21, Huang Minlan 1994, and Tang 1996: 68-79.
[57] Liang 1996k: 3.

degree of voluntarism thus marked Liang's historiography.[58] But the point to be emphasized here is that Liang again used the theory of competition between groups (here, races) to explain why some unified themselves (*zijie* 自結). This was a universal process of struggle and domination he traced through stages of clans, villages, tribes, and finally the nations of the present age.[59] Whether these increasingly higher and progressive stages of human organization could someday transcend nation (or race), the way nations transcended tribes, is left unclear. At the same time, Liang scarcely took "groups" as a given. Although it is Liang's relentless faith in evolutionary progress that strikes the reader, he also possessed a keen appreciation for the internal articulation (specialization of labor, class divisions, cooperation of different elements) of groups. Unification and strength never, for Liang, consisted of uniformity or simplicity.

Conclusion

It was common at the turn of the century to dismiss China's entire post-Qin history as a kind of wrong turn: a 2,000-year detour, and Liang was not immune to this view. One point was to use the ancient past to attack the recent past, but more was involved as well. To denigrate the Han and the Tang along with the traditionally despised Qin was to attack, above all, a particular form of dynastic kingship. If the relationship between Confucianism and monarchism, as between the gentry and the court, had never been entirely easy, still the reformers were attacking imperial Confucianism as it had developed over centuries. This is, of course, one reason why conservatives and even less radical reformers were so shocked by Kang and Liang during the reform period of 1898. The only kingship that generations had known was at stake. This was a highly moralistic and, in terms of Kang Youwei's historical readings, arbitrary treatment of China's past.

However, Liang Qichao quickly moved beyond this type of radicalism after 1898. Before the Reform Movement of 1898, no leading Chinese scholar

[58] For the role of human consciousness in Liang's historical thought, see Huang Kewu 1994: 132-133.
[59] Liang 1996k: 11.

had ever challenged the sacrality of the originary moment of Chinese civilization – whether this moment represented the origins of the monarchy or the nation (or both). The radical reformers, following Kang's New Text views, had sacralized Confucius and played down the institution of the monarchy, but they never entirely severed sagehood from kingship, nor did they challenge the sacrality of the originary moment. Liang, however, in effect simply dismissed the originary moment question as unimportant. Though his writings on Chinese history were sketchy, they rigorously used a development scheme that reduced "origins" to one stage only. The stage of "barbarian freedom", if attractive in some ways, was necessarily limited and primitive.

In other words, as we will see, in contrast to scholars (and revolutionaries) searching for a Chinese or Han "essence", Liang's basically naturalistic approach treated "essence", if at all, as a byproduct of evolutionary progress. Although Liang perhaps never entirely shook off the sense of Chinese history as a pattern of early glory followed by decline, his new and influential master narrative stressed gradual development. Again this had political implications. Although the revolutionaries were influenced by Liang and by Darwinism more generally, they continued to use a trope of "glory-decline" narrative – whether the wrong turn was taken by the Qin or the later Manchus. Liang's progressivism, however, legitimated the Manchus in terms of a necessary stage of despotism, now coming to an end. Yet we must also note that Liang always retained his critical faculties (or in other words, he was not always consistent). In "Ode to Young China" he essentially accused the dynastic courts of usurping the nation from the people, making it the "private property of one family" instead of the "public property of the people", and even in his "New Historiography" Liang continued to excoriate Chinese kings for "privatizing" the empire, their actions legitimated by false theories of the scholars.[60]

In the late Qing, the question of the originary moment of the Chinese nation remained poised between Golden Age nostalgia and a more rigorous social developmentalism. The master narrative of decline and stagnation was a powerful one that never entirely disappeared, but Liang's forceful expression of the historical law of progress through universal stages was even stronger.

[60] Liang 1996h: 9-10, 1996k: 20.

The commonplace observation of the 1890s that the Qin marked a fatal slide into autocratic decadence was replaced in the 1900s with the reluctant conclusion that even the Qin signaled a progressive step in the making of the Chinese nation. Liang, at least at times, forthrightly praised the absolutist monarchy for its role in forging a unified citizenry. Higher levels of social organization were created regardless of moral concerns. At least morality in the traditional sense of transcendental, cosmically-based rules had no place in the new historiography (except perhaps as ethical notions were themselves historical products of particular times and places). Thus was the new historical master narrative desacralized.

However, as we have seen, moral questions did in fact insert themselves into the new historical narratives. Liang's version of Darwinian evolutionism implied a developmental pattern which was itself normative. After the steady progress of antiquity (loosely under the sage-kings and the three dynasties), the stalling or retardation of historical progress of the post-Qin imperial age was a matter of distress and tension.

In his argument that "ancient history" was in fact created by Confucius for heuristic purposes, Kang Youwei threw doubt upon the Classics as a source of historical data – and so in important ways anticipated the future "doubting-antiquity" (*yigu* 疑古) movement, as Wang Fansen has pointed out.[61] The point here is that this freed Liang to rewrite ancient history by more rigorously fitting it into a scheme of evolutionary stages. The New Text school's attack on the textual authenticity of the Classics was critical in allowing Liang to take the next step beyond Kang Youwei and leave Confucius behind. In Liang's new history after 1900, "China" emerged not from the writing brush of Confucius but out of the development of a particular people in a particular place.

But why "China"? This is a naïve question, and no doubt over-determined: many factors led to the replacement of dynasties and chronicles with the nation and narrative. If not China's history, what history were late Qing intellectuals to think about? National histories were translated from Western languages from the mid-nineteenth century.[62] By the turn of the century,

[61] Wang Fansen 1987: 50-53.
[62] Peng Minghui 2002: 233-241.

Japanese history textbooks were also widespread. The ancient-medieval-modern division of time was imported, as was the application of this view of time to the collective subject of the nation. Liang Qichao was particularly struck by evolutionary thought as conveyed both in New Text forms by Kang Youwei and in social Darwinist forms by Yan Fu, even if these two forms did not in fact mix very well. Finally, the Chinese "we" required a narrative structure to make sense out of the jumble of events recorded in the ancient texts. Beginning with the political necessity of national identity, Liang (and others) discovered that identity itself required a theory of historical stages (cf. Carr 1986). Collective identity is forged in common experiences reflected in story-events. The theory of historical stages provided Liang with a temporal (and narrative) structure perfectly suited to his purposes, though of course those purposes were also created by the narrative structure at his disposal.

If Chinese historiography in the late Qing does not look fully modern – still lacking specialization in an academic setting, still attached by a last thread to stories of the sage-kings – the impulse to reconceptualize Chinese history that had emerged out of the scholastic and political trends of the 1890s had nonetheless secularized historical processes, created a hegemonic master narrative of progress, and shifted the historical subject to the nation (group). In this transition, classical scholarship (*jingxue* 經學) destroyed itself as a political force and was transformed into historical and philosophical pursuits. Liang's was not the only contribution to this process but his was a major one. He did not, as Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 was to do, doubt the very existence of the sage-kings, and he left them as cultural symbols of ancient Chinese achievements. Liang did, however, transmute these old myths into the building blocks of his new, evolutionary history of the nation.

References cited

Carr, David (1991), *Time, Narrative, and History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Chang, Hao (1971), *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Intellectual Transition in China, 1890-1907*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Chen Feng 陳豐 (1993), "Bumou er he: 'nianjian pai' he Liang Qichao de xin shixue sixiang" 不謀而合：「年鑑派」和梁啟超的新史學西想 (Unexpected similarities: the "annales" school and Liang Qichao's new historiographical thinking), in *Dushu* 讀書 177 (December): 42-47.

Chevrier, Yves (1987), "La servante-maîtresse: condition de la référence à l'histoire dans l'espace intellectuel chinois", in *Extrême-Orient, extrême-occident, Cahiers de recherches comparatives IX, La référence à l'histoire*, 117-144.

Duara, Prasenjit (1995), *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fitzgerald, John (1996), *Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Furth, Charlotte (1983), "Intellectual Change: From the Reform Movement to the May Fourth Movement, 1895-1920", in John K. Fairbank, ed., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 12, Republican China, 1912-1949, Part I. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 322-405.

Hsiao, Kung-chuan (1975), *A Modern China and a New World: K'ang Yu-wei, Reformer and Utopian, 1858-1927*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Huang Jinxing 黃進興 (1997), "Zhongguo jindai shixue de shuangchong weiji: shilun 'Xinshixue' de dansheng ji qisuo minlin de kunjing" 中國近代史學的雙重危機：式論「新史學」的誕生及其所面臨的困境 (The dual crisis of modern Chinese historiography: A preliminary discussion of the birth of the "new history" and its predicament), in *Journal of Chinese Studies* (Chinese University of Hong Kong) 中國文化研究所學報 6: 263-284.

Huang Kewu 黃克武 (1994), *Yige bei fangqi de xuanze: Liang Qichao tiaoshi sixiang shi yanjiu* 一個被放棄的選擇：梁啟超調適思想之研究 (A rejected choice: A study of Liang Qichao's accomodative thinking). Taibei: Jindai yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo.

Huang Minlan 黃敏蘭 (1994), "Liang Qichao 'Xin shixue' de zhenshi yiyi ji lishixue de wujie" 梁啟超《新史學》的真實意義及歷史學的誤解 (The true significance of Liang Qichao's "New Historiography" and historiographical misinterpretations), in *Jindaishi yanjiu* 近代史研究 80(2): 219-235.

Kang Youwei 康有為 (1958) [1897]. *Kongzi gaizhi kao* 孔子改制考 (Confucius as a reformer). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.

Kwong, Luke S.K. (2002), "The Rise of the Linear Perspective on History and Time in Late Qing China, c. 1860-1911", in *Past and Present* 173: 157-190.

Lewis, Mark Edward (1999), *Writing and Authority in Early China*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1996a), "Bianfa tongyi" 變法通議 (A general discussion of reform), *Yinbingshi heji* 飲冰室合集 (Collected essays from the Ice-drinker's studio – hereafter YBSHJ). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, wenji 文集 1: 1-92.

– (1996b), "Lun Zhongguo jiangqiu falü zhi xue" 中國講求法律之學 (China should pursue the study of law), in YBSHJ, wenji 1: 93-94.

– (1996c), "Lun Zhongguo jiruo youyu fangbi" (The origins of China's weaknesses lie in avoiding harm), in YBSHJ, wenji 1: 96-100.

– (1996d), "Yu Yan Youling xiansheng shu" 與嚴幼陵先生書 (Letter to Yan Fu), in YBSHJ, wenji 1: 106-111.

– (1996e), "Shuo qun xu" 說群序 (Grouping, introduction), in YBSHJ, wenji 2: 3-4.

– (1996f), "Lun junzheng minzheng xiangshang" 論君政民政相嬗之理 (The logic of the replacement of monarchy by democracy), in YBSHJ, wenji 2: 7-11.

– (1996g), "Lun Zhongguo yu Ouzhou guoti yitong" 論中國與歐洲國體異同 (Similarities and differences in the Chinese and European political systems), in YBSHJ, wenji 4: 61-67.

– (1996h), "Shaonian Zhongguo" 少年中國 (Ode to Young China), in YBSHJ, wenji 5: 7-12.

– (1996i), "Zhongguoshi xulun" 中國史敘論 (Introduction to Chinese history), in YBSHJ, wenji 6: 1-12.

– (1996j), "Yao Shun wei Zhongguo zhongyang junquan lanshang kao" 堯舜為中國中央君權濫觴考 (A study of Yan and Shun as the source

of centralized monarchical power in China), in YBSHJ, wenji 6: 22-27.

– (1996k), "Xin shixue" 新史學 (New history), in YBSHJ, wenji 9: 1-32.

– (1996l), "Baojiao fei suo yi zun Kong lun" 保教非所以尊孔論 (Preserving the faith is not the way to respect Confucius), in YBSHJ, wenji Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 9: 50-59.

– (1996m), "Zhongguo zhuanzhi zhengzhi jinhua shilun" 中國專制政治進化史論 (Historical treatise on the political evolution of Chinese autocracy), in YBSHJ, wenji 9: 59-90.

Luo Zhitian 羅志田 (2002), "Baorong ruxue, zhuzi yu Huang Di de guoxue: Qingji xhiren xunqiu minzu rentong xiangzheng de nuli" 包容儒學、諸子與黃帝的國學：清季士人尋求民族認同象徵的努力 (The rise of national learning: Confucianim, the various ancient philosophers, and the Yellow Emperor in Chinese intellectuals' search for a symbol of national identity in the late Qing), in *Taida lishi xuebao* 台大歷史學報 29 (June), pp. 87-105.

Mori Norihiko 森紀子 (1999), "Ryô Keichô no butsugaku to Nihon" 梁啟超の佛學と日本 (Liang Qichao's Buddhism and Japan), in Hazama Naoki 狹間直樹, ed. *Kyôdô kenkyû Ryô Keichô: Seiyô kindai shisô juyo to Meiji Nihon* 共同研究梁啟超—西洋近代思想受容と明治日本 (Joint research on Liang Qichao: the reception of modern Western thought and Meiji Japan). Tokyo: Misuzu shobô, 194-228.

Peng Minghui 彭明輝 (2002), *Wan Qing de jingshi shixue* 晚清的經世史學 (Statecraft historiography in the late Qing). Taibei: Maitian chuban.

Shen Songqiao 沈松僑 (1997), "Wo yi woxie jian Xuanyuan: Huangdi shenhua yu wan Qing de guozu jianguo" 我以我血薦軒轅 – 黃帝神話與晚清的國族建構 ("I sacrifice to Huang Di with my blood": Huang Di myth and the construction of nationhood in the late Qing), in *Taiwan shehui yanjiu jikan* 台灣社會集刊 28 (December): 1-77.

Tang, Xiaobing (1996), *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity: The Historical Thinking of Liang Qichao*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Tang Zhijun 湯志鈞 (1984), *Kang Youwei yu wuxu bianfa* 康有為與戊戌變法 (Kang Youwei and the 1898 reform movement). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.

Wang, Edward (2001), *Inventing China through History: The May Fourth Approach to Historiography*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Wang Fansen 王汎森 (1987), *Gushibian yundong de xingqi* 古史辨運動的興起：一個思想史的分析 (The rise of the critical ancient history movement: an intellectual historical analysis). Taibei: Yunchen wenhua.

– (2001), "Wan Qing de zhengzhi gainian yu 'Xinshi xue'" 晚清的政治概念與「新史學」(Political views and the "New historioraphy" in the late Qing), in Luo Zhitian 羅志田, ed., *Ershi shiji de Zhongguo: xueshu yu shehui – shixuejuan* 20 世紀的中國：學術與社會 – 史學卷 (Twentieth-century China: Scholarship and society – History), vol. 1, pp. 1-30.

Wang Yeyang 王也揚 (1994), "Kang-Liang yu shixue zhiyong" 康、梁與史學致用 (Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and historical studies for practical purposes), in *Jindaishi yanjiu* 近代史研究 80(2): 204-218.

Xu Guansan 許冠三 (1989), *Xinshixue jiushinian, 1900–* 新史學九十年：一九OO– (Ninety years of new historiography, 1900–). Hong Kong: Zhongwen daxue chubanshe.

Zarrow, Peter (2002), "The Reform Movement, the Monarchy, and Political Modernity," in Rebecca E. Karl and Peter Zarrow, eds., *Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period: Political and Cultural Change in Late Qing China*. Cambridge, MA: HUAC, Harvard University Press, 17-47.

Zhang Pengyuan [Chang P'eng-yuan] 張朋園 (1982), *Liang Qichao yu Qingji geming* 梁啟超與清季革命 (Liang Qichao and the late Qing revolution). Taibei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo.