

The Confucian Tradition in Liang Qichao's Early Democratic Thought: Intellectual Transformation from the Wuxu Reform to His Trip to America (1895-1903)

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Abstract. Liang Qichao was an important representative in the dissemination of modern democratic thought. He not only valued traditional Confucianism but was also adept at absorbing advanced Western democratic ideas. During the period from 1895 to 1903, Liang Qichao's thought was very open, experiencing a stage from germination to depth and then to maturity. This article explores the Confucian tradition in Liang Qichao's early democratic thought in these three stages, analyzing the practicality of his democratic views during the Wuxu Reform, the westernization of his thought after his exile in Japan, and the return to Confucian private morality after his trip to North America. Liang Qichao's democratic thought embodies a distinct temporality. His ideas not only provided theoretical support and practical guidance for China's political reforms at the time, but also had a profound impact on the Xinhai Revolution, the New Culture Movement and the entire political development of 20th-century China, demonstrating his sense of responsibility as a thinker and reformer of his time.

Keywords: Liang Qichao, Mencius, Confucianism, democratic thought

1. Introduction: The Formation of Liang Qichao's Early Democratic Thought

Modern Chinese democratic thought was not spontaneously generated but was introduced from the West, undergoing a process of collision and adaptation with traditional Chinese political culture. In "A History of Modern Chinese Democratic Thought", Xiong Yuezhi systematically traces the introduction of modern Chinese democracy, noting that Wei Yuan, Xu Jiyu, and Liang Tingnan were the first to introduce Western democratic systems¹. After the Second Opium War, ministers such as Guo Songtao showed interest in advanced Western systems². Early reformists, such as Wang Tao and Zheng Guanying³, systematically compared the strengths and weaknesses of Chinese and Western

¹ Wei Yuan highly praised the democratic republican system of the United States in *Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Countries*. He commended that "matters of discussion, hearings of lawsuits, selection of officials and recommendation of the worthy all start from people" ("*General Introduction to the Outer Atlantic Region of America*"). Xu Jiyu's "*An Outline of the World*" and Liang Tingnan's "*Records of the Barbarian Disturbances*" also used the United States as an example to distinguish between democratic and autocratic systems.

² Guo Songtao carefully studied UK's parliamentary system. He wrote in "*Diary of a Mission to the West*", "Tracing the origin of its national establishment... there is a feeling of conforming to the wishes of the people. With these two aspects in check, the monarch and the people are mutually maintained, rising and falling in turn and the country has remained intact for more than a thousand years."

³ Zheng Guanying first clearly proposed in "*Discussing Political Affairs*" that China should implement a constitutional monarchy.

systems, proposing clear ideas for political system reform. After the Sino-Japanese War⁴, people finally realized the necessity of reform, and the long-developing democratic thought matured. In this trend, Liang Qichao was undoubtedly the greatest synthesizer. Kang Youwei attempted to graft Western democratic thought onto traditional political concepts. Liang Qichao went a step further, offering more in-depth interpretations of both Chinese political traditions and Western democratic thought.

Academia has produced many achievements in the study of Liang Qichao's scholarship on Mencius⁵. It is generally believed that Liang Qichao's thought is inherited from and subverts that of his teacher Kang Youwei. Domestic scholars such as Tang Zhijun⁶[1] and Xiao Gongquan⁷[2] have elaborated on this in detail, and foreign scholars Chi Ho Ivan Hon⁸[3] and Sangwook Lee⁹[4] have also illustrated this point. When discussing Liang Qichao's contribution to Mencius's thought, Tang Zhijun pointed out the changes in Liang Qichao's thought over different periods based on his works from different eras¹⁰. Other scholars such as Chi Ho Ivan Hon¹¹, Philip Huang¹², and Joseph R. Levenson¹³ have discussed Liang Qichao's theory of Mencius respectively from the perspectives of "xingshanlun" (the theory of the original goodness of human nature), "minguijunqin" (the people are more important than the ruler) and civil rights. As discussed by the aforementioned scholars, Liang Qichao mainly used Mencius's thought to advocate "tuogugaizhi" reform under the guise of reviving ancient institutions, which, like his teacher, is actually a kind of pragmatism, applying traditional thought to constitutional practice. At the same time, Liang Qichao's concentrated exposition of Mencius's idea of people-oriented thought also reflects his progressive ideas and nationalism. He used the political wisdom of ancient sages to devote himself to finding a realistic path to an ideal society.

Regarding Liang Qichao's Western democratic thought, academia has conducted research on its formation process in stages. Juan Wu summarized Liang Qichao's constitutional movement into three stages¹⁴, [5] pointing out that his thought often wavered between civil rights and the state, nation and

⁴ The First Sino-Japanese War was a conflict between China and Japan that took place from 1894 to 1895.

⁵ Mencius was a prominent Chinese philosopher and one of the most important figures in Confucianism. He lived from around 372 BCE to 289 BCE during the Warring States Period in ancient China.

⁶ Tang Zhijun was one of the earliest scholars in China to study Liang Qichao's Mencius studies. He believed that Liang Qichao's early promotion of "Datong" (a society where everyone lives in peace and prosperity) was influenced by Kang Youwei.

⁷ Xiao Gongquan generally agreed with Tang Zhijun's view and pointed out that Liang Qichao's early advocacy of Datong was inspired by nationalistic ideas, and this idea was strengthened after his exile in Japan, gradually distinguishing it from Kang Youwei.

⁸ Chi Ho Ivan Hon's "Chinese intellectuals' reconstruction of Confucianism in the late 19th and early 20th Century" points out that Liang Qichao clearly distinguished Confucianism from religion, differentiating himself from Kang Youwei who portrayed Confucius as a religious master.

⁹ Sangwook Lee's "The Beginning of the Path to Self-Discovery: A Study on Liang Qichao's Concept of Nation" argues that Kang Youwei's theory of Datong had a profound influence on Liang Qichao's thoughts on civil rights.

¹⁰ Taking "Reading the Explanation of Mencius" and "On Mencius" as examples, Tang Zhijun points out that there were significant changes in Liang Qichao's thoughts over time. He believes that when Liang Qichao wrote "Reading the Explanation of Mencius", he was conducting propaganda for the Wuxu reform. He used the Confucian idea of "Datong" to expound on the principle that everything must "change", stating that only through reform could the "taipingshi" (era of great peace) be achieved. In his later years, Liang Qichao devoted himself to academic research and was committed to evaluating Mencius from an academic perspective.

¹¹ Chi Ho Ivan Hon regarded "human nature" as a means for Liang Qichao to carry out social reform, promoting historical progress by enhancing moral cultivation. He believed it also drew on Western ideas of progress.

¹² Philip Huang questioned the rationality of Liang Qichao's advocacy of the idea of civil rights in Mencius, arguing that it was people's livelihood under autocracy, relying on the benevolence of the ruler.

¹³ Just like Philip Huang, Joseph Levenson also believed that the theoretical foundation of Liang Qichao's such thoughts on civil rights was very weak.

¹⁴ Juan Wu's "Narrating Myth with Nationalism: Liang Qichao's Role in Shaping Early Chinese Mythology" summarizes Liang Qichao's constitutional movement into three stages. The first is the period when Liang Qichao initially came into contact with Western modernity ideas, the second is the period of his exile in Japan, and the third is after his visit to Europe. He points out that Liang Qichao's

freedom, constitutionalism and revolution. Xiao Gongquan also provided a detailed discussion of this "wavering"¹⁵. Additionally, scholars have conducted in-depth research on the internal coordination¹⁶ and national character¹⁷ of Liang Qichao's thought, as well as its divergence from Kang Youwei¹⁸ and its connection with various foreign ideas¹⁹.

In discussing the relationship between the two sides, many scholars have noted that Liang Qichao gained democratic experience from Mencius, which greatly helped the formation of his later constitutionalist ideas²⁰. However, some scholars have questioned his use of Mencius's ideas to argue for the rationality of constitutional theory, arguing that this is not sufficient to support the framework construction of modern democratic theory²¹.

Currently, in academic research on Liang Qichao's thought, on the one hand, from a temporal perspective, there is relatively rich research on the mature stage of his thought after his trip to North America, but the process of the early development and evolution of his thought is relatively less clear; on the other hand, the academic community has not paid sufficient attention to the interpretation of the combination of Mencius's people-oriented thought in his democratic thought. The Confucian tradition embodied in Liang Qichao's early democratic thought is mainly reflected in his understanding of Mencius. Therefore, this article takes Mencius as an example to explore the role of Confucianism in Liang Qichao's democratic thought. The evolution of Liang Qichao's democratic thought can be divided into three stages, including the budding stage around the Wuxu Reform²²

attitude towards Western civilization also underwent changes from initially fully supporting it to partially criticizing it, and then to cultural reflection.

¹⁵ Xiao Gongquan believes that Liang Qichao's democratic thoughts were restricted by both Western aristocratic politics and China's autocratic rule, so he was easily hesitant between old and new ideas.

¹⁶ Anh Nguyen's "Reconstructing Liang Qichao" argues that Liang Qichao's ideas of freedom and nationalism were interdependent, and there could be coordination between individual and state power, as demonstrated by his theory of the new citizen in the article.

¹⁷ Both Alison Adcock Kaufman and Sangwook Lee have made specific interpretations of the national character in Liang Qichao's thoughts. Alison Adcock Kaufman believes that the transformation of Liang Qichao's revolutionary thoughts lies in taking the national character of the country as the top priority and having a greater inclination towards monarchical authority and elite legislation ("One Nation Among Many: Foreign Models in the Constitutional Thought of Liang Qichao"); Sangwook Lee, on the other hand, believes that Liang Qichao's concept of nation has developed into a form of greater nationalism, which is essentially statism, and resists external imperialist aggression by endowing the people with the political identity of citizens.

¹⁸ Both Chi Ho Ivan and Sangwook Lee mentioned that Liang Qichao's thought became radical after he went into exile in Japan, and he began to support the republic; Alison Adcock Kaufman also specifically pointed out that in Liang Qichao's article "On the Reasons for the Succession of Monarchical and Democratic Politics", he advocated that not only Manchus and Han Chinese, but even all Asian people should unite to resist white people, which transcended Kang Youwei's idea of civil rights and linked nationalism with civil rights.

¹⁹ Sangwook Lee has elaborated on Liang Qichao's absorption of various new concepts he encountered in Japan, such as state, citizen and nation; Alison Adcock Kaufman also believes that Liang Qichao was influenced by a series of new ideas, including Neo-Confucianism, Spencerianism, Anglo-American classical liberal constitutionalism, German and Japanese constitutionalist thought; Adcock Kaufman also points out that Liang Qichao was committed to transforming many new concepts into discourse suitable for the Chinese context, reflecting his active creation in the process of passively receiving new ideas.

²⁰ Zhang Hao believes that Liang Qichao's pragmatic thought, which he obtained from Mencius, was the foundation of his early reformist ideology (Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Intellectual Transition in China); Zhao Lianchang also points out that Liang Qichao often quoted Mencius's words to argue for the national character and ethnicity required for constitutionalism (On the Cultural Conservatism Tendency of Liang Qichao's Later Thought); Sangwook Lee also praises Liang Qichao's interpretation of democracy, and he further believes that China's concept of "nation" was not spontaneously generated from the bottom up, but was excavated by China's elite through the introduction of foreign ideas. This concept of nation is not only the result of modern Western thought, but also includes the influence of East Asian countries such as Japan.

²¹ Chi Ho Ivan Hon argues that although Mencius's concept of "minben" (people-based governance) is similar to modern Western democracy, it does not involve specific democratic institutions, such as representative government, a complete democratic framework. Therefore, Liang Qichao's reinterpretation of people-based governance is insufficient to embody the spirit of democracy. Philip Huang and Joseph R. Levenson also point out that there are essential differences between Mencius's concept of "minben" and modern Western democracy.

²² The Wuxu Reform was a significant attempt at modernization in late Qing Dynasty China, aiming to transform China into a modernized nation through a series of political, economic, and educational reforms. The leaders were Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao.

from 1895 to 1898, the period of in-depth thought from the failure of the reform in September 1898 to the writing of “Xinmin Shuo” in 1902, and the mature stage around his trip to America from February to October 1903.

During the Wuxu Reform, Liang Qichao was eager to promote reform and had illusions about an ideal society, so he used the doctrines of Confucius and Mencius to promote the necessity of reform. After the failure of the reform movement, Liang Qichao went into exile in Japan, where he came into contact with various Western ideas. His democratic thought became increasingly modern and aligned with the Western world, thus seeing many unreasonable aspects of the old Confucianism, that is, the conflicts with modern democracy. After his trip to America, his thought changed again. He saw the shortcomings of the American republic and witnessed the degeneration and corruption of the new party, doubting that if revolution could solve social problems. From this, he believed that the current citizens did not have the qualifications to participate in politics, and only by handing over the initiative of reform to the government with more political ability, and gradually transitioning to a constitutional monarchy through reform, could the long-term and effectiveness of democratic implementation be guaranteed, and the excellent elements of traditional morality could be combined with modern democracy to cultivate new citizens with modern civic awareness. Therefore, Liang Qichao's democratic thought is essentially a response of the intellectual class to the national future issues in the 19th century.

2. The Wuxu Reform Period: Early Democratic Thought Based on the Study of Mencius

After the defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, Liang Qichao, lamenting the state of affairs, rallied with a group of intellectuals, organizing societies, founding newspapers and periodicals, and commenting on current affairs to prepare public opinion for the reform movement. During this period, his thinking was relatively open, mainly serving the reform, and he formed his own views on both Chinese and Western learning. He especially admired Confucianism, frequently quoting Mencius in his articles to express his yearning for an ideal society and expound his political views.

In the early manuscripts of Liang Qichao, scattered discussions of Mencius are readily apparent, with these manuscripts mostly concentrated in the period of 1896-1898. In August 1896, Liang Qichao founded the *Shiwu Bao* (The Chinese Progress) in Shanghai, stating, "I founded a ten-day journal in Shanghai called *Shiwu Bao*, personally writing “*Bianfa Tongyi*” (A Comprehensive Treatise on Reform), criticizing corrupt politics, and the method for remedying these ills lies in abolishing the imperial examination system and establishing schools, also frequently issuing arguments for 'civil rights'." [7] In his essay “General Discourse on Schools”, he first explained the current neglect of traditional Confucian classics in education, "However, regarding the profound meanings of the ancients, the so-called 'reciting three hundred poetries can qualify one to govern,' and the ‘Spring and Autumn Annals’²³ embodies the aspirations of the former kings. Few can pay attention, thus they are merely learning what they learn and still having no connection to the classics, even no connection to education." [8] In discussing the measures for reforming schools, Liang Qichao repeatedly cited “Mencius” to illustrate the importance of educational reform. Taking the chapter “Elementary Education” as an example, Liang Qichao quoted Mencius's "teaching has many methods" to point out that teachers should pay attention to methods and guide students according to their individual talents. He also quoted "cultivate their heavenly nobility to attain human nobility" to criticize those behaviors where "from the beginning of their learning, what they revered and emulated was originally in those they learned from, not in themselves." [8] In “Mencius”, "human nobility" refers to "ministers and high officials," while "heavenly nobility" refers to moral cultivation such as

²³ The Spring and Autumn Annals is one of the Five Classics of Confucianism, which provides a detailed account of the history of the Lu state.

"benevolence, righteousness, loyalty, and trustworthiness." Liang Qichao used this to emphasize that the essence of education should not be the pursuit of fame and fortune, but rather, like the sages of old, cultivating oneself, establishing virtue and pursuing knowledge, so as to realize the true meaning of education. In this newspaper serving the Wuxu Reform, Liang Qichao frequently quoted "Mencius" between the lines, hoping to resonate with the public through Confucian classics.

In addition to interpreting traditional Confucianism, Liang Qichao also showed great interest in Western thought. He was receptive and eager to learn foreign ideas, and thus demonstrated a strong tolerance for foreign ideas in modern democratic thought. As early as 1890, when Liang Qichao went to Beijing to participate in the imperial examination, he read books such as "Wan Guo Shi Ji" and "Ying Huan Zhi Lue", gaining a preliminary understanding of the Western world. Later, he specifically included Western studies in his reading plan and widely read Western books translated by the Shanghai Manufacturing Bureau. He also compiled and translated various books, dividing them into scholarship, politics, and education.[8] However, at this time, he still placed more emphasis on revitalizing Chinese learning, stating that "the problem now is not that Western learning isn't flourishing, but that Chinese learning is about to perish." [8] In his view, Western learning was merely a means to reform secondary education, not the foundation for establishing the nation.

Liang Qichao's early attention to Confucianism and Mencius was also due to Kang Youwei. While at the Wanmu Caotang Academy²⁴, Liang Qichao participated in compiling works such as "New Text Forgery Examination", "Confucius' Reform Examination" and "Spring and Autumn Dong's Learning". He also discussed Kang Youwei's "Datong Shu" (The Book of Great Unity) with his peers. There is considerable debate in academic circles about when Kang Youwei imparted the idea of the "sanshishuo" (Three Ages of Great Unity) to Liang Qichao, but it can be seen from Liang Qichao's letters to Yan Fu and his article "On the Succession of Monarchical and Democratic Governance" that Kang Youwei had already imparted the "sanshishuo" to him at least during the Wanmu Caotang period. However, compared to traditional classical interpretations, Liang Qichao clearly placed more importance on solving practical problems. In a letter to Kang Youwei, he advised him to be cautious in his writing, and not to "focus solely on speculative textual research, neglecting practical textual research, and make bold assertions without the slightest evidence"[9], which could be exploited by opponents.

It is evident that Liang Qichao focused on Confucian thought prior to the Qin dynasty, while concerning himself with practical issues. Liang Qichao's democratic ideas during the Wuxu Reform highlighted the characteristics of pragmatism. During the Wuxu Reform, he wrote "Reading 'Mencius' Interpretation", giving Mencius extremely high praise. He evaluated Mencius that "he was constantly concerned with saving the world, truly representing the orthodox school of Confucianism." [8] Liang Qichao's praise of Mencius actually contains a grand aspiration to emulate Mencius. In his view, Mencius was not only a successor to Confucianism but also a great practitioner, dedicated to applying Confucius's profound ideas to solve real-world problems. Liang Qichao hoped to advocate for the country and its people like Mencius. He not only quoted Mencius's words in his reform proposals but also turned his attention back to Mencius and the era in which Mencius lived, hoping to find a practical path to an ideal society in these classic works. This sense of social responsibility consistently permeated his academic thought and political activities.

Liang Qichao's early democratic thought took Confucian "renyi" (benevolence and righteousness) as its core and the theory of "sanshishuo" as its theoretical foundation. Ding Wenjiang²⁵ believed that his remarks at that time could be summarized as "advocating the theory of civil rights, equality, great

²⁴ Wanmu Caotang was an important academic institution founded by Kang Youwei in the late 19th century.

²⁵ Ding Wenjiang had a deep friendship with Liang Qichao and was also a leading figure in the study of Liang Qichao. His book, "A Detailed Chronological Biography of Liang Qichao", is an important reference material for academic research on Liang Qichao and the verification of his life.

harmony and promoting the meaning of protecting the country, preserving the race and preserving education"[9], which was quite accurate. In his "On the Theory of the Succession of Monarchical and Democratic Governance", he elaborated on the meaning of the "sanshi" in the "Spring and Autumn Annals", "First, the age of governance by multiple rulers; second, the age of governance by one ruler; third, the age of governance by the people." [8] The transition from governance by multiple rulers to one ruler and then to the people corresponds to an age of chaos, of rising peace, and of great peace, respectively. This is an inevitable process, and only by reaching the age of great peace can true great harmony be achieved. In many of his discussions, he used this view as the basis for his arguments. For example, he used the historical fact that Confucius made laws for the three ages to illustrate that the change of laws and social evolution are synchronized, and then argued that legal reform is necessary at the present stage. In his letters with Yan Fu, he also mentioned the "sanshishuo". He refuted the idea that "Western history says that the situation of democracy began in Greece and Rome. Qichao believes that those ages were not democratic. If we consider them democratic, then we can say that ancient China also had democracy." [8] He believed that the so-called "democracy" in ancient Greece and Rome and the aristocratic politics of the Spring and Autumn period in China were essentially the same and were not true democracy. Therefore, the responsibility for China's democratic backwardness compared to the West should not be simply attributed to the monarchy, but should conform to the laws of historical development and promote democracy to catch up with the West.

As Liang Qichao argued, the first step in reform is to cultivate talent, and Liang Qichao attributed its to the lack of public knowledge. He pointed out that Europe has a tradition of collective deliberation, which has developed into the current parliaments and societies. Meanwhile, he emphasized that China also has this tradition, "Confucius had three thousand disciples, Mencius had hundreds of followers, Zixia in the Western River, and Zengzi in Wucheng." [8] All of them are proof of collective wisdom. However, later Han and Song scholars abandoned this tradition, leading to China gradually falling behind the West. It can be seen that Liang Qichao is good at comparing the similarities between Chinese and Western learning. He turned his attention back to the three dynasties, that is, the prosperous age of the Confucian so-called "the Great Way prevails", and then pointed out the long-term crux of China to discuss the urgency of reform, reflecting his unique academic vision.

However, although he advocated the implementation of "minzheng" (civil administration), he believed that the time was not yet ripe and that the foundation for the transition from "one ruler governing" to "the people governing" had not yet been formed, that is, the people's intelligence had not been developed, and reforms must first be carried out in schools and education. In his article "An Examination of Ancient Parliaments", he explicitly stated that "every country must have its customs opened, its literature flourishing, and its people's intelligence developed before a parliament can be established." [8] He also compared the traditions of civil rights in China and the West, believing that the Western parliamentary system is an embodiment of the combination of monarchical power and civil rights, and that this political wisdom of communicating between superiors and subordinates was recorded in "Mencius" long ago, "When all the people of the state say he is virtuous, then examine him; when all the people of the state say he is not capable, then examine him; when all the people of the state say he should be killed, then kill him." [10] Liang Qichao called it "the reality of a parliament", indicating that Liang Qichao believed that now is not the time to overthrow monarchical rule, but rather to promote this ancient Chinese democratic tradition, so that the people can awaken to democratic consciousness, and thus promote institutional reform.

3. Exile in Japan Period: Confucian People-Oriented Thought Regarding the Drawbacks of Western Democracy

On September 21, 1898, Empress Dowager Cixi launched the Wuxu Coup and ordered the arrest of Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao and others. Subsequently, Liang Qichao fled to Japan, and his thought and scholarship entered a new stage. During his time in Japan, Liang Qichao read and translated many Japanese books in the fields of political science, economics, sociology and philosophy. At that time, China was in a period of crisis, so he became more eager to pay attention to the current situation, widely introducing foreign democratic ideas and trying to find the right way to save the nation from peril. At the same time, he began to compare Chinese and Western political thought traditions from an ontological level, adjusting his previous ideological system based on Confucianism. He pointed out that Confucianism emphasized ethical codes and ritual governance, which overly relied on the monarch and did not align with the requirements of a democratic system.

Japan served as an important stepping stone in Liang Qichao's widespread acceptance of Western democratic thought. After arriving in Japan in 1899, Liang Qichao learned Japanese from Luo Xiaogao and read Western books translated by the Japanese. He praised these books, stating that they were "particularly detailed in political science, economics, intellectual studies, and social studies, all of which are urgent tasks for enlightening the people and strengthening the country." [9] Among them, Fukuzawa Yukichi's "Seiyo Jijo" (Conditions in the West) and Nakamura Masanao's "Saigoku Risshi Hen" (Self-Help) and "Jiyu no Riri" (The Principles of Freedom) had a profound influence on him. He then used these books to further understand Western Enlightenment thinkers and various democratic trends of the 19th century, from Rousseau to John Stuart Mill, systematically learning about Western democratic and civil rights movements, and was deeply influenced by liberalism and nationalism. Furthermore, Liang Qichao actively promoted overseas Chinese education locally, engaging in educational work with a group of patriots, thinkers, and educators.

During his time in Japan, Liang Qichao had frequent interactions with Sun Yat-sen and gradually developed a tendency to support revolution. He considered collaborating with the Revive China Society²⁶ to overthrow the Qing government. Although this plan ultimately did not materialize, it reflected the transformation of Liang Qichao's thinking during this period. After experiencing setbacks in the Wuxu Reform of 1898 and the execution of the Six Gentlemen²⁷, Liang Qichao became deeply disappointed with this top-down, internal reforms. Despite being sheltered by Japanese friends, he was troubled by the state of affairs and urgently sought a path to change the old system and enable China to become independent and strong. Especially under the continuous nationalistic sentiment in Japan, Liang was increasingly influenced by the emotions of 'anti-Manchu' and 'revolution.' Ding Wenjiang noted, "At this time, there were two types of public opinion among the Japanese, one was the advocacy of Asian independence, and the other was the advocacy of a balance of power with Europe. Deeply resentful of the severe oppression and bullying by foreigners, Liang published three articles, "Words of Warning on the Partition of China", "On the Strength of China's Independence and Japan's Eastern Policy" and "On the Future of the Chinese Race"[9].

During this period, Liang Qichao recognized the differences between Confucian "minben" (people-oriented) thought and Western democratic thought, discovering many undemocratic aspects. He believed that "Confucian political thought contains an inherent contradiction, namely that the distinction between sovereign power and the rights of the people is unclear." [11] In "Xinmin Shuo" (the New Citizen), he further explicitly pointed out that "We Chinese people only hope for benevolent

²⁶ The Revive China Society was founded by Sun Yat-sen in 1894, which played a significant role in the early revolutionary movements in China.

²⁷ The Six Gentlemen were six reform-minded officials who were executed by the Empress Dowager Cixi after the failure of the Wuxu Reform, including Tan Sitong, Kang Guangren, Lin Xu, Yang Shenxiu, Yang Rui and Liu Guangdi.

governance from our rulers, so when we encounter a benevolent ruler, we become like infants to them, and when we encounter an unbenevolent ruler, we become like fish and meat to be consumed.”[11] Confucian political thought cannot limit the power of the monarch or exert the power of the people. Therefore, it is fundamentally a product of the monarchical era, and is incompatible with modern democracy.

In promoting democracy, Liang Qichao emphasized freedom of thought. In his article "Defending Confucianism is Not the Way to Venerate Confucius", he explicitly stated his opposition to making Confucianism the state religion. "People not only dare not speak, but also dare not think.”[11] During this period, Liang Qichao's thought was very open. He actually pointed out a new trend in the future development of thought, which is to liberate the mind, and to abandon everything that hinders national thought and blocks the path of the people. Ding Wenjiang also pointed out that this view actually distinguished him from Kang Youwei, "It is not just a question of whether a religion should or can be defended, because in terms of political and academic thought, he clearly pointed out a new direction, so thereafter, Liang and Nanhai had differences in thought and scholarship.”[9]

Liang Qichao also emphasized the importance of exercising popular sovereignty. He believed that the rights of the people are inherent, stating "the country is the public property of the people", considering the interests of the country and its people as a whole. "With the people of one nation, govern the affairs of that nation, establish its laws, seek its benefits and defend against its dangers. Its people cannot be insulted, and its country cannot be destroyed.”[8] Therefore, in his "A Study on Yao and Shun as the Origin of the Abuse of Central Monarchical Power in China", he offered a new interpretation of the abdication of Yao and Shun, arguing that they were not the origin of China's democratic system, but rather opened up monarchical power. This is because the sovereignty of the state should reside in the people, and the abdication of Yao and Shun was essentially a private transfer of monarchical power. Liang also cited Mencius's view "to lead the land and eat human flesh, the crime is unforgivable by death"[10] to interpret as a statement against national competition. It is believed that Mencius opposed this kind of competition between countries, namely, "unjust wars." Based on this, Liang Qichao thought that citizens should proactively take on the responsibility of competing with other countries to defend national interests and strive for legitimate rights in the international arena, which is also the duty of citizens.

At the same time, Liang Qichao also discussed the issue of political systems. In his "A Comparative Study of Constitutions of Various Countries", he systematically introduced the constitutional system, calling it "a completely flawless constitutional government." In "Deliberations on Constitutional Law", he further analyzed the advantages and disadvantages of various political systems, pointing out that both the constitution and civil rights are indispensable. The so-called constitutional government is about limiting power. This kind of limited power system, "the monarch has the power of the monarch, but the power is limited; the officials have the power of the officials, but the power is limited; the people also have the power of the people.”[8] This can avoid the variables existing in a democratic constitutional system, improving the effectiveness of governance, and the monarch is endowed with a sacred halo. And without actual administrative power, it can also reduce disputes. "Why must the monarch be made irresponsible? It is said, to avoid revolution.”[11]

Liang Qichao also had more specific and in-depth thoughts on enlightening the people, which are reflected in "Xinmin Shuo". On February 8, 1902, "Xinmin Congbao" (The New Citizen Journal) was founded in Yokohama, Japan. Liang Qichao founded "Xinmin Congbao" with the intention of "taking the meaning of 'xinmin' (renovating the people) from the 'Great Learning'²⁸, believing that to reform our country, we must first reform our people.”[9] Liang Qichao believed that the lack of public morality was the reason for the lack of awakened civic awareness, hoping to cultivate a new citizenry

²⁸ "The Great Learning" is one of the Four Books of Confucianism.

with a new set of moral standards. The meaning of "new" has two aspects, "First, to refine and sharpen what one already possesses and renew it; Second, to adopt and supplement what one does not originally have and renew it." [11] That is, the new citizen should both adhere to their original character and innovate by absorbing advanced foreign experiences. The core of public morality is to cultivate citizens' awareness of political participation. Liang Qichao believed that the Western "yi" (righteousness) is a more important virtue than "ren" (benevolence), "benevolence is about others, I benefit others, and others also benefit me, so what is valued is always in others; righteousness is about myself, I do not harm others, nor do I allow others to harm me, so what is valued is always on myself." [8] When the nation is in peril, compared to benevolence, the concept of 'yi' is clearly more necessary. Liang also pointed out that China has always "emphasized private virtue while public virtue is almost entirely lacking" [11]. He believes that Confucian classics such as the "Analects" and "Mencius" emphasize self-cultivation and moral refinement but neglect the importance of prioritizing the collective over the individual, resulting in the current citizens lacking a sense of national identity and being unable to participate in political activities independently. He believes that citizens have the duty to strive for personal freedom and national rights, and to work towards the establishment of a modern nation in the true sense.

4. After the Trip to North America: The Return of Confucian Private Morality²⁹ Under the Reality of Popular Sentiment

In February 1903, Liang Qichao traveled to the Americas at the invitation of the American Royalist Society³⁰ and returned to Japan in October. The main purpose of this trip was to establish branches of the Royalist Society in various locations. During this time, Liang Qichao witnessed the operation of political parties in the United States and also discovered corruption, a lack of public spirit and disorganization within many Chinese autonomous organizations. Consequently, he felt greatly disappointed with the future of the Chinese revolution, lamenting, "The demise of China will not be due to the stubborn, but to the new party." [9] He believed that the Chinese people were not yet qualified to participate in politics, and that China lacked the social foundation for establishing a democratic republic. Liang Qichao then turned to exploring within Confucianism, re-emphasizing the significance of private morality. His democratic thought exhibited a conservative tendency, advocating that the government, rather than citizens or organizations, should be the main body of the revolution.

After returning from North America, Liang Qichao believed that the current national capacity for political participation and deliberation was insufficient. He witnessed the chaos of Chinese groups in San Francisco, lamented that democracy had not truly been brought into play, and was distressed by the endless infighting among many secret societies. "Suddenly several groups combine into one federation, suddenly one group splits into several enemy states, engaging in constant conflict with short guns and daggers, resulting in the deaths of a dozen or even dozens of people each year, truly a phenomenon unparalleled in the world." [11] He stated directly, "The citizens of China today can only be subjected to autocracy and cannot enjoy freedom." [11] In the article, he also rationally analyzed that this was caused by the lack of unified thought. "Although the group appears to be very large and strong on the surface, in reality, its content contains various elements of different natures." [11] At the same time, Liang believed that, in addition to the problems with these political groups themselves, relying solely on the people could not save China. He put forward that the Chinese had three shortcomings, "First, they lack political ability; second, they are too conservative; and third,

²⁹ Confucian private morality refers to the personal morality, such as honesty, kindness and self-discipline.

³⁰ A significant political organization established in 1899 by prominent reformers such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao. The association aimed to support Emperor Guangxu, advocate for a constitutional monarchy.

they lack lofty goals.”[9] Therefore, Liang pointed out that without mandatory constraints, this kind of group cannot bring about public benefits at all and can only poison society in the end. He realized that blindly following the West under the current social conditions could not save China, and that revolution was not suitable for China's national conditions.

Liang Qichao abandoned the bottom-up revolution and returned to the top-down reform. He no longer regarded the “xinmin” as a means to revolution, but returned to the reformism, hoping to complete political reform through the power of the government. He pointed out, “The self-governance ability of our people is very weak, and it is clear that it should be solved simply by government suppression.” “Furthermore, if the current government suddenly changes, promulgates a constitution, implements civil administration and exercises the major powers of legislation, administration and judiciary, can our people then accept and use them freely once they are returned to our people?”[11] The government has special political advantages, so Liang Qichao valued it so much. He also quoted Mencius's “For the people, only those with constant property have constant hearts, while those without constant property have no constant hearts.”[10] He believed that only the government could give people “permanent property”, and only the government can satisfy people's political, cultural and moral needs.

In addition to observing the role of the government, Liang Qichao also turned his attention back to traditional Confucianism, re-examining Confucian values. He believed that the corruption of the current political atmosphere was due to the lack of individual moral cultivation of citizens, and emphasized the need to reawaken the national moral outlook. Liang Qichao discussed public morality in sections 1 to 17 of “Xinminshuo” and it was not until the article “Private Morality” that he reconsidered the issue of morality, proposing that cultivating personal private morality should be regarded as the primary task of cultivating citizens. The distinction of private virtue from public virtue lies in its greater emphasis on personal cultivation, emphasizing from the inside out. The reason why Liang Qichao turned to promote private morality is that it is based on traditional Confucian morality, which is easier for people to accept and can be extended from the inside out to the society. However, Liang Qichao vigorously advocated private morality, but he did not deny the role of public morality. He believed that private morality can also be extended to society, just as Mencius said, “The reason why the ancients surpassed others was nothing else but their ability to extend what they did.”[10] Liang also summarized three standards of private morality that can be practiced, “First, rectify the foundation; second, be cautious when alone; third, be careful about small things.”[11] He believed that private morality was the foundation of public morality, which could stimulate citizens' moral consciousness and national pride.

In Liang's era, he saw how various new theories influenced the younger generation. He began to reflect on whether contemporary society had the capital for “destruction”, and how to rebuild a new moral order that conformed to the times. “If everything is destroyed, not only will what should be established in the future not be established, but even what should be destroyed at present will ultimately not be destroyed. This is what I dare to assert.” Moreover, “morality is action, not words. Its origin lies in the freedom of conscience, without past or present, newness or oldness.”[11] Morality itself originates from internal standards of behavior and has no distinction between new and old. Therefore, Liang Qichao believed that due to the different social natures of China and the West, each country inherently possesses specific moral standards suitable for itself. If it is necessary to establish a new morality to transform the people, then the best approach is to return to tradition, which is also the fundamental way for a society or a nation to maintain itself in the long term.

5. Conclusion

In the early stages of forming his democratic ideas, Liang Qichao was greatly influenced by Confucianism, especially the thought of Mencius. He integrated the morality, ideals, political

aspirations and spirit of traditional Confucianism into democratic construction. Then he combined it with his own understanding to form a new ideological system that encompassed both ancient and modern, Chinese and Western thought. During the Wuxu Reform Movement of 1898, facing the invasion of the great powers and the aggravation of the national crisis, Liang Qichao abstracted traditional Confucianism and Western democratic theories to solve practical problems of reform. During his time in Japan, Liang Qichao came into extensive contact with Western democratic ideas and began to deeply reflect on the drawbacks of Confucian populism. He realized the significance of constitutional reform, emphasizing the need to mobilize the people to the greatest extent and improve the quality of the people. After his trip to the Americas, Liang Qichao realized that the current national conditions were not suitable for taking the revolutionary road. He returned to reformism, reverting to the Confucian view of private morality. He also believed that the task of cultivating new citizens and launching reforms should be handed over to the government, promoting political change through gradual means.

Looking at the three stages of Liang Qichao's democratic thought evolution, it can be seen that he moved towards the integration of Chinese and Western ideas in the comparison between China and the West. He was good at extracting advanced ideas from both China and the West for his own use. This tendency of pragmatism is reflected in his advocacy of reform to save the nation. Under feudalism and national crisis, he actively promoted the Reform Movement, advocating arming the people with advanced theories and promoting the power of the people. At the same time, he was able to adapt to the times, embrace new ideas with an open mind and link himself with the destiny of the entire country and nation. He always thought about the future of the country and the mission of the people in history. His patriotism and national mission have made great contributions to China's modernization and the dissemination and popularization of democratic ideas.

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