Sun Yatsen, Liang Qichao: Friends, Foes and Nationalism

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The founding father of the Republic of China, Sun Yatsen was born in 1866 in Xiangshan, a county in Guangdong province. In neighboring Xinhui County, Liang Qichao, another important Chinese intellectual, who inspired Chinese reform movement in the late 1800s, was born seven years later. No one would have expected that those two men would maintain a very intricate relationship in ending China’s last feudal empire, regarding each other as both friend and foe at different points in their lifetimes. Unlike Liang, who was a member of the literati class, Sun had very few literati credentials and stressed his connections with the southern anti-Manchuism of both the Taipings and the secret societies of the Triads in the late 1800s. On the other hand, after the failure of the Hundred Days’ Reform with his mentor Kang Youwei in 1898, Liang was forced to flee the country, seeking refuge in Japan in the first few years of the 1900s. It was during this time that Liang was first introduced to the idea of nationalism, which greatly influenced Sun’s idea of nationalism as one of the core concepts of his “Three Principles of the People.”

In Liang’s mind, China should embrace *daminzuzhuyi* (broad nationalism), holding various ethnic groups in the arms of a unified China. In order to achieve that end, Liang, for most of career, believed that a gradual transition within the Manchu government would be most effective. Sun certainly could not agree. To him, it was the first priority to get rid of the Manchu rule for a Han-centered Chinese nationalism. To that end, Sun argued, a violent revolution was unavoidable and essential.

As both Liang’s and Sun’s ideas interweaved and clashed, it is important for historians to question the similarities and differences between Liang’s and Sun’s ideas about modern Chinese nationalism in order to derive the implications behind such comparisons. This essay shows that both Liang Qichao and Sun Yatsen worked to develop modern Chinese nationalism and to integrate it into the Chinese identity at the turn of the century; however their visions differed within nationalism’s scope and implementation. As an important implication of such comparisons, this essay further points to Sun’s eventual success in bringing down the Manchu government due to his personal charisma and pragmatism compared to Liang’s often unpredictable and vulnerable characteristics.
Nationalism: Liang and Sun’s Acquaintances

Nationalism appeared with the rise of the nation-state system in Europe in the late 18th century and it was an alien concept to China in its relations with the rest of the world, as its major approach to foreign powers was culturalism. Certainly, this concept will be explored later in the paper. As a brief definition, culturalism puts ancient China in the center of the world order, and Chinese emperors believed that as long as foreign countries adopted Chinese culture and values, they could be a part of China. However, this long-held view was quickly destroyed with western intrusion into China in the 19th century, when nationalism found its voice and entered into the minds of Chinese intellectuals.

The emergence of Chinese nationalism was unique and it had to deal with two aspects, both internally and externally. China in the 19th century was fighting against an alien government that was too weak to resist outside forces and those very outside forces, the imperialist powers, at the same time. As Louis L. Snyder states, nationalism arose in Asia because of a psychological need.¹ Chinese people were shocked to see “foreign barbarians” using advanced weapons that they had never seen before, ripping their country apart and demanding from the weak Qing government compensation for their aggression. They were also outraged by Qing’s submissiveness in signing unequal treaties, making land concessions, and forcefully opening additional native ports. With humiliation and fear, the people under such circumstances urgently needed a cohesive force to restore their confidence in their country. Nationalism thus became a solution.

As a result, Sun Yat-sen and Liang Qichao began to converge on their ultimate goal to rid China of the old oppressive system. According to Sun, nationalism was ‘the treasure for a state to prosper and for a nation to survive.’² This echoed Liang’s belief that China’s lack of nationalism served to hold back its progress and that comprehensive reforms were necessary to change China’s fundamental values in national cohesiveness. Therefore, in the first few years of his exile in Japan, complicated by the Empress Dowager’s demand to arrest him, Liang was persuaded by Sun to join his force against the Manchu through a

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violent revolution. While in Japan between 1899 and 1903, Liang was exposed to western philosophies on state, rights, and people. He was extremely impressed with the success of Japanese Meiji Reform and persuaded Sun to introduce his networks in America to him. During this period, Sun’s and Liang’s nationalist ideologies converged when they both envisioned a Republic of China by redefining statehood through revolutions. It was at this time that their relationship entered a honeymoon stage. However, this was quickly destroyed after Liang’s visit to North America in 1903.

Liang’s trip to the United States, a country that embodies a democratic republic, became another turning point of his nationalist philosophy. While visiting Chinatown in San Francisco, Liang saw corruption and chaos that were no different from the situation in China. Embarrassed and disappointed, Liang the eloquent nationalist felt ashamed of what he saw of his people, people whom he regarded as poorly prepared for the modern world. He began to feel that the fundamental weaknesses of the Chinese, as a people, made them unfit for a republic. He arrived at a drastic conclusion that order and unity, instead of republicanism or freedom, would best serve his motherland. Therefore, Liang switched from a pro-revolutionary and pro-republic stance to a pro-Manchu one, advocating an enlightened absolutism within China. This is one of the most important points in Liang’s development of Chinese nationalism – he realized that a government free from foreign rule did not entail effective governance. This also meant a complete reversal of his original position, a repudiation of the cause to which he had been devoted to in the past.³

Such rhetoric severely worsened Sun Yat-sen’s relationship with Liang Qichao, as Sun had been determined to create a republic by overthrowing the Manchu government. From 1903 to the dawn of the revolution, Liang and Sun began a series of intense polemics that eventually drove many of Liang’s supporters to Sun’s revolutionary cause. As a revolutionary organizer, Sun was perseverant, spreading his popularity and gaining recognition and respect from both foreign organizations and domestic secret societies. This was particularly demonstrated through the financial support Sun received from Chinese overseas, who felt connected to Sun’s American upbringing and were inspired

by his revolutionary speeches. In contrast, Liang was an outspoken literatus who grappled with a range of stances. Though converging to some extent on their approach to modern Chinese nationalism, drastic differences remained. These diverging interests led to Sun’s success in bringing down the Manchu government, whereas Liang’s vision of a liberal monarchy did not come into existence.

Recognizing Liang Qichao’s significance in first introducing modern Chinese nationalism, his inability to carry a coherent definition of it through the reform indeed made him “one early story of the futility of the efforts of individual liberal reformers in twentieth-century China.” As Peter Harris argues, Liang was “vacillating and uncertain” about his ideas at several points of his life, which raised skepticism among his followers. Joseph Levenson echoes this view by pointing out that “the mutual incompatibility of the aims which Liang set for historians was but a single symptom of the one great over-all inconsistency…he remained caught in his dilemma.” It was exactly Liang’s capricious personality that hindered his political advancement, making his ideology on nationalism unreliable to public eyes.

On the other hand, William Rowe emphasizes Sun’s “oft-attested personal good looks and charisma,” his strengths as a public speaker, and “his flair for the dramatic,” suggesting Sun to be a more suitable revolutionary to bring about actual changes than Liang. This also reflects what Chuyuan Cheng terms Sun’s “strategy and priority.” Even though Rowe defines Sun as a “propagandist, [and] a broker among other revolutionary elements,” he points to the success of Sun’s pragmatism in winning support over Liang, who had gained the upper hand at the very early stage of the reform.

Despite divided views on Sun’s and Liang’s success in utilizing

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4 Tang, Global space and the nationalist discourse of modernity – the historical thinking of Liang Qichao, p161.
9 Rowe, p271.
nationalism to achieve their respective objectives, Liang’s close friend Yang Du, who was also very gifted in political talents, articulated that if Liang wanted to defeat Sun, he should be consistent and hold on to one principle of nationalism that “the simpleminded” could follow and thus concentrate on one cause. This clearly explains the popularity of Sun’s approach to nationalism, since not every Chinese was able to comprehend the complexities of the nationalist philosophy: the slogan of Anti-Manchuism and Revolution won mass appeal. With hindsight, Yang Du’s persuasion points right at Liang’s weakness in materializing his goal of nationalism, namely inconsistency and intellectualism. This in turn explains Sun’s success as a pragmatic political leader.

Whose version of nationalism was more appealing to the people? Why was that? Recognizing the similarities and differences between Sun’s and Liang’s visions of nationalism, I agree with Yang Du’s comments that Liang’s nationalist idea had a huge impact on Sun, but what made Sun’s ideas more appealing to the public was to a large extent his charisma and pragmatism. Thus, this essay will first analyze the similarities between Liang’s and Sun’s nationalist ideologies, exploring their converging roots and goals. Then, it will examine the differences in their visions of nationalism, looking specifically at the scope of nationalism and the implementation of nationalism. As a final note, this essay attempts to explain Sun’s leadership and strategies in utilizing nationalism to dismantle the Manchu government, against which Liang failed to compete.

_The Convergence: Waking up from Culturalism_

Liang and Sun converged on their recognition of the importance of modern Chinese nationalism and they shared the ultimate goal to rid China of the ancient system. Both Sun Yatsen and Liang Qichao defined modern Chinese nationalism as a rejection of ancient Chinese culturalism, which was based more on a cultural standard than a racial dissimilarity. This was elaborated by the 20th century Chinese philosopher Feng Youlan, that before the 1900s the Chinese were concerned about the “continuation and integrity of the Chinese culture and civilization” in making a distinction between “China” and the “Barbarians,” but this was made according to a “cultural criteria rather than a racial difference.” Therefore, it is important to know what Chinese culturalism was

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10 Ibid., p271.
11 Tang, p161
12 Feng Youlan 冯友兰, Zhongguo zhexue jianshi《中国哲学简史》, Beijing:Beijing daxue chubanshe 北京大学出版社, 1985, p 211–222
and how Sun and Liang replaced it with modern Chinese nationalism based on ethnicity and state.

Before modern Chinese nationalism came into being, from a culturalist point of view, the word “Chinese” meant a general acceptance of traditional Chinese culture, especially Confucianism. Consequently, the distinction between being Chinese and being barbarian depended on the acceptance of Confucianism. This meant that there was a lack of strict boundaries between being Chinese and non-Chinese ethnically. Once the barbarians were assimilated into Chinese culture, they became Chinese. The difference between culturalism and nationalism was essentially the following: culturalism suspends foreign ideas, but it may not obviously oppose foreign material force, while nationalism reverses these relations; it may accept foreign ideas, but it absolutely fights against foreign material incursions. Indeed, given a deteriorating condition within China, the Chinese at that time were desperately fighting foreigners on a physical level rather than on a conceptual one.

In defining China’s relationship with the barbarians, culturalism adopted the view of Tianxizhuyi (China-centric universalism). This view envisioned a hierarchical world order with China at the center, and the Chinese emperor, who was the Son of Heaven, had the mandate of Heaven to rule Tianxia (everything under the Heaven). Zhimin Chen added to this characteristic that within this world order, “China did not see herself as one state among others, but as the only civilized entity that had to live with uncivilized ‘barbarians.’”\(^{13}\) Such a view clearly showed the isolation of the entire East Asian political order from the rest of the world before the mid-nineteenth century. Feng Youlan, a prominent Chinese scholar, further wrote that “the reason underlying the lack of Chinese nationalism was that the Chinese were used to seeing things from a universal perspective.”\(^{14}\) Echoing this view, writing in the 19\(^{th}\) century, Kunikida Doppo, a Japanese literary figure, wrote that the Chinese were “totally devoid of national consciousness.”\(^{15}\) Certainly, he was commenting on Chinese culturalism through a modern perspective; Chinese before the 19\(^{th}\) century had never perceived Chinese identity through a racial or ethnic perspective other than a Confucian one. This explains precisely the reason why the concepts of modern nation state and nationalism did not play

\(^{13}\) Zhimin Chen, “Nationalism, Internationalism and Chinese Foreign Policy”, Routledge: Journal of Contemporary China, 14: 42, p37

\(^{14}\) Feng, p222.

any important roles prior to the 19th century.

Yet the barbarians’ invasion and conquest in the 19th century showcased their military superiority and formidable culture and religion. The western powers had shaken the foundation of a China-dominated world order. Indeed, the competition between traditional culturalism and modern nationalism among the Chinese intellectuals at the turn of the century saw the time when “nationalism [invaded] the Chinese scene as culturalism [gave] way.”16 This was a huge step and an inevitable development; in Levenson’s words, nationalism in the late 19th century was enlisted as “a non-Chinese remedy to the problem of Chinese survival.”17

It was under such historical context that Liang Qichao and Sun Yatsen began to form their ideas on modern Chinese nationalism. Both of them witnessed endless Manchu failures in combating the imperialists, were influenced by Western thoughts of state building and nationalism, and attempted to define modern Chinese nationalism through a state and ethnic point of view. When Liang was hiding in Japan in early 1900, Sun used his Japanese connections to protect Liang and introduced him to his secret societies in America. It was at that point in history that Liang and Sun both agreed to a violent revolutionary plan; it was also at that point in history that they formed an alliance to enhance Chinese nationalism in order to overthrow the Manchu-rulers. Even though this period did not last long, it was significant in laying the foundation of modern Chinese nationalism.

Despite the subsequent divergences, it was interesting to see an eventual convergence after the 1911 Revolution when Sun began to promote a broad nationalism and ethnic tolerance. It could be said that Sun’s and Liang’s relationship in developing Chinese nationalism went through peaks and troughs. While both of them were competing for support, the path Sun took to achieve Chinese nationalism appealed to the mass population and eventually drew the intellectuals into supporting him. This certainly revealed Sun’s unique charisma and pragmatism by not only winning support for his version of nationalism, but also in overthrowing the Manchu government. Before exploring this implication from such comparisons, which will be discussed in the final section of the paper, I will examine two most significant divergences on Sun’s and Liang’s versions of modern Chinese nationalism.

17 Levenson, Liang Chi-Chao and the mid of modern China, p. 110.
The Divergences: Scope of Nationalism

At the turn of the twentieth century, Liang Qichao and Sun Yat-sen both turned to nationalism to rescue a faltering China, but their different approaches to the concept determined their diverging political agendas. One major difference between Liang’s and Sun’s interpretation of modern Chinese nationalism is the scope of nationalism — guojiazhuyi (state nationalism) and minzuzhuyi (ethnic nationalism), respectively. Liang saw nationalism as the sum of a nation’s cultural character, ranging from ethics to literature. He proposed to have special characteristics within China that could bind the people together. Liang commented that, China was not in any way similar to the Austrian Empire, which had its war of Germans against Slavs, instead saying that the people of China were essentially one but with two dominant races, Chinese and Manchus. His experiences in Western countries convinced him that what China needed the most was an organic integration and forceful order. He felt that all the ethnic groups in China should unify, and “together as a third of the world’s population, they would occupy a prominent position in the world.” Therefore, nationalism was essential to unite Chinese, as Western countries had done, to survive under a Darwinist order. State nationalism, as Liang endorsed, was a belief in the state not only as an instrument of national construction, but as the center of political thought where the primacy of the state was emphasized. This meant that that state should first be a unified entity before it engaged itself in political and social development. In other words, a state should act as a political tool, utilizing its authority to promote its peoples’ consciousness of nationalism.

Moreover, Liang believed that state nationalism implied the development of a multi-ethnic state, meaning a state made up of several smaller entities and not where one dominant group ruled over the rest. By arguing this, Liang subjugated Han Chinese to a coalition of rulers from various ethnic groups, thus denying a potential Han-ruled modern China. Commenting in 1903 on the work of the German philosopher Johann Bluntschli, who had a major influence in shaping his state nationalism, Liang wrote, “what is small nationalism (ethnic nationalism)? It is the Han nation as opposed to the other

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18 Levenson, Liang Chi-Chao and the mid of modern China, p161
19 Chen, p38-39
20 Ibid., p38-39
21 Harris, p125
nations in the state. What is great nationalism? It is the various nations of the state, core and peripheral, as opposed to the various nations abroad.”22 Great nationalism was another name Liang gave to state nationalism.

In 1903, when Liang was in Japan after the failure of the reform, he was disappointed by Qing’s inability to resist foreign aggression, the administrative negligence that caused disastrous famines, and the severe epidemics that ensued. He came to believe, not without justice, that the Chinese could not blame the Manchus alone for their own wrongdoings, which was merely self-delusion. Liang argued that the expulsion of a foreign government – the Manchus – would not mean the end of a bad government.

More importantly, Liang believed that the Manchus, whom the ethnic nationalists attempted to disapprove, were well assimilated into the Chinese nation. In other words, the Manchus had become completely “Sinified,” and if the Chinese could see themselves as citizens, the Manchus could do the same.23 To counter Sun’s argument that the Manchu was the evil foreign intruder who inflicted pains on Chinese society, Liang insisted that the transfer of power in the 17th century could not be seen as a transfer from Chinese to Manchus; rather it was a spontaneous development when the Manchu government succeeded power. In other words, Liang thought the historical spontaneity could be viewed as “the Qing eclipsed Ming, that the rule of the [Zhu] family ended and the rule of the Aisin Gioro began”24 instead of seeing Manchu as the foreign aggressor. To Liang, the imperialist aggressors from the outside were the threat, not the Manchus, as Sun and the other radical nationalists emphasized. As a result, China had to strengthen its state nationalism to unite a heterogeneous population, following what the United States had done to consolidate its sovereignty over various groups of people, to fight the outside forces.

Liang’s appeasement with the Manchu and his adoption of state-nationalism, which embraced all ethnic groups of China were deeply disturbing and humiliating in the eyes of Sun and his revolutionary supporters. Sun advocated that the principle of nationalism was “to seek equality with the

22 Liang Qichao 梁启超, “Zhengzhixue dajia Bolunzhili zhi xueshuo” 《政治学大家伯伦知理之学说》， in Liang Qichao, Yingbinshivenji, vol.2, 收录于梁启超《饮冰室文集》，第二卷，Shanghai: Shanghai WenhuajinbuShe, 上海文化进步社，1935, p.18
23 Levenson, Liang Chi-Chao and the mind of modern China, p162
24 Ibid, p161
foreigners and not be their slaves.25 Only when China rid itself of Manchus could it become strong, and only when that happened would China be able to talk with foreign aggressors about equality. According to Sun’s version of nationalism, the Chinese should not be satisfied with the fact that the minority was small and the nation was strong in terms of its immunity from racial struggle, but should feel ashamed that a minority of Manchus so small could rule the majority Han. The answer to Chinese unification was straightforward to Sun – ethnic nationalism. Before the revolution of 1911, Sun advocated Han Chinese nationalism to beat the Manchus, which was a product of racial difference. He called on the Han Chinese to save the country by overthrowing the Manchu rulers, and to build a Chinese state governed by Han majority. However, it was noteworthy that Sun was only against Manchu-rule – the Manchu elites who took control over the dynasty – not the entire Manchu ethnic group.

Sun Yatsen contributed China’s absence of nationalism to the lack of distinction between itself and the outside, which had subordinated China to one hundred thousand Manchus in the early seventeenth century, and the Manchus, once in power, made every effort to brainwash the Chinese of their barbarian origin. He in turn compared this with what Japan had done to Korea—the Manchus were destroying the national consciousness of the Chinese.26 He was also worried that under “foreign” domination, the Chinese people might give in to foreign culture. Looking at the historical progression, Sun rejected Manchu-rule, claiming the rulers as traitors of Chinese sovereignty. He emphasized Liang’s naivety, arguing that state nationalism would only be slavery and subordination without establishing ethnic nationalism first. It was a foreign dynasty and its conspirators who betrayed China, not its tradition and culture. One day, it would retake the mission as protector of weaker Asian countries. Taking these concerns into account, Sun’s ideas on nationalism emphasized Chinese consciousness, ethics, social structure, and intellect as the foundation for a modern polity.27

Clearly, the political consequences of granting the nation a Han-

dominated nationalism would be the dissolution of the Qing Empire. This further led to another deeper divergence between Liang’s and Sun’s take on Chinese nationalism in view of reforms and revolution.

*The Divergences: Paths towards Nationalism*

Another major difference between Liang’s and Sun’s visions of modern Chinese nationalism is the paths Sun and Liang took towards nationalism. Liang, as mentioned before, switched his stance on Chinese reforms on a few occasions, and after 1903 to the dawn of the revolution, Liang wanted a gradual reform of the Manchu rule, which he believed would evolve into a constitutional monarchy. He thought the situation in China was different from that in Russia or France, and he encouraged China to follow the path of the Meiji Reform. Only in this way could Chinese be truly unified under the broad banner of state nationalism. To this end, Liang strongly opposed a violent revolution that would bring much more chaos if Manchu-rule was overthrown.

In contrast, from the very beginning of his political career, Sun worked to enhance Chinese nationalism through an immediate and forceful revolution to overthrow the Manchu government. Sun’s vision of post-revolutionary China was a republican form of government whereas Liang still supported a government with the emperor holding limited power at the top.

Liang was hostile to the thought of a republican China. One important reason was that he knew it was inevitable to use violence to achieve that end. He was repulsed by the thought of violence after 1903 because it would not lead to an end of trouble and the impact of using nationalism to initiate a revolution would come back to haunt the revolutionaries one day. As a further analysis, Liang believed that imperialistic powers would unavoidably intervene amidst the chaos of a revolution, which would resemble what had happened in 19th century China. He demonstrated that Chinese rebellions, which generally covered a longer period of time than European ones did and wrought more havoc, showed a very strong correlation with foreign intervention and exploitation. In attacking Sun’s violent path to achieve Chinese nationalism through a revolution, Liang inaccurately claimed that Sun said that half of the four hundred million people of China would be sacrificed to accomplish the goals of the revolution; he further exaggerated that Sun was only trying to use bloodshed as a way to achieve his revolutionary objectives. This would lead to China’s collapse. Therefore, Liang foresaw a detrimental chain of events if an

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attempt should be made to establish a republic in China. In other words, a violent revolution would have deadly impact on China, causing internal conflicts and external chaos.

Compared to Liang Qichao, SunYatsen believed that the origin of China’s political troubles laid in the monarchy system and that too many Chinese aspired to become the emperor themselves. Therefore, China had to become a republic to rid itself of imperial institutions and the dynastic lineages. Sun anticipated the revolution to fulfill his vision of Chinese nationalism. To counter Liang’s argument of chaotic rebellions in the past, Sun clearly focused on the need to have a plan to develop genuine changes, even before taking actions to bring down the old regime. \(^{29}\) He argued that a revolution was the only way to inspire Chinese nationalism, and Liang was holding unrealistic dreams of a non-violent gradualist approach. \(^{30}\) As a result, Sun remarked that Liang’s attack on his violent approach to achieve Chinese nationalism was highly “opinionated,” stating Liang “accused me [Sun] with illusion.” \(^{31}\) In Sun’s perspective, Liang’s adoption of a constitutional monarchy went against revolutionary’s fundamental principle of anti-Manchu rule, which entailed Han subordination to an alien government. This was unacceptable to Sun.

After Liang Qichao failed in the One Hundred Days of Reform movement in 1898, intellectuals in favor of more radical solutions to China’s problems began to gain further influence. As James P. Harrison pointed out, the difference between earlier Chinese culturalism and Chinese nationalism of the twentieth century lay mainly in the Chinese peoples’ “increased knowledge about what modernization implied and in their willingness to action this knowledge regardless of consequences.” \(^{32}\) In the early 1900s, with Sun’s emerging popularity, Chinese under that historical context gained appetite for radical changes as an embodiment of their newfound nationalism. It is important to note that Sun’s solid stance to utilize nationalism to start a revolution that would overthrow the Qing gained momentum when his passionate speeches aroused an atmosphere of crisis and urgency in China. Sun effectively fought Liang’s gradualist and constitutional monarchy movement, giving an alternative to the Chinese intellectuals who formerly favored Liang’s

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29 Ibid., p97
30 ShiYunyan 石云艳, Liang Qichao yu Riben, 《梁启超与日本》, Tianjing: Tianjinrenminchubanshe 天津人民出版社, 2005, p421
32 Cheng, p141
approach but later became confused themselves. Consequently, more Chinese began to equate Liang’s wish to use persuasion on the emperor to achieve his nationalist goals as another form of slavery, which would never end the feudal system.

Apart from domestic popularity, Sun’s rising influence in overseas Chinese communities also weakened the reformist faction. During the process, Sun’s revolutionary force was strengthened day by day. On the contrary, Liang, who originally thought to use his argument against Sun to win supporters to his side, drove many of the reformers to the revolutionary side. He maintained a disadvantaged position as revolution approached.

Pragmatic Politician vs. Unpredictable Literatus

Whose version of nationalism was more convincing to the people? Despite their ideological similarities and differences, Sun’s charisma and pragmatism allowed him to more effectively achieve his nationalist objectives than Liang, who was sensitive and often inconsistent with his stance. This was particularly demonstrated through Sun’s clear anti-Manchu objective as the one force that pulled people together. Liang, on the other hand, switched to an anti-Manchu stance between 1898 and 1903, then to a pro-Manchu approach from 1903 to 1919, and finally to complete conservatism for an authoritarian rule after 1919. His arguments were seen as frequently contradictory to the ones he made before. In a time of extreme chaos in China, Liang’s volatility placed him second to Sun. Against the wave of hysterical revolutionary zeal, Liang abandoned his initial agreement to use nationalism for a republican cause and decided that China needed to have an authoritarian government. This certainly put him into direct confrontation not only with Sun, but with many student activists who originally supported him. Thus, Liang’s popularity plunged.

Joseph Levenson gave a very interesting account on Liang’s inconsistent approach to nationalism: “the only arguments available for Liang’s rationalization of his new positions [were] irreconcilable,” meaning he often contradicted himself, and “he may be permitted some [wildness] without our questioning the coherence of his collected thoughts.”33 Xiaobing Tang further commented on Liang’s inconsistency and as he saw it, Liang had in one hand a “modern, homogenizing concept” and a “symbol of resistance to modernity” in the other.34 Indeed, Liang was caught in his personal dilemma, the conflict between “the

33 Levenson, Liang Chi-Chao and the mind of modern China, p128
34 Harris, p129
abstract, logical necessity to choose between two alternatives, history and value,
and the practical, historical necessity to cling to them both."\textsuperscript{35} Even Liang
claimed himself to be on the middle ground.\textsuperscript{36} For this fact, it might be said that
Liang was a literatus – he had an intricate thought system – but he could not
put ideas into actions.

Upon Sun’s death in 1925, reporters from the Chenbao (Morning
Newspaper) asked Liang how he thought of Sun. Liang responded, “Mr. Sun
Yatsen’s entire life was devoted to unscrupulous means to achieve his goals, so
[I] couldn’t know his real worth.”\textsuperscript{37} Though with a negative connotation, Liang’s
response reflected Sun’s success as a pragmatic politician, who knew how to
maneuver and prioritize issues to his own advantage. Interestingly enough, at
one point, when attacked by Liang’s fiery article on Sun’s nationalist approach,
Sun, in obvious frustration with Liang, responded, “my proposal has been
consistent, but Liang’s is not. He changes his positions all the time. How could
he make such a false accusation [against me]?”\textsuperscript{38}

Sun Yatsen knew from the very beginning the advantage of using anti-
Manchuism as a political slogan to arouse Chinese nationalism and mass
support. The effect of it was twofold, as it motivated “the upper levels of society
with the nationalist cause”, and “the lower levels with a vengeful spirit.”\textsuperscript{39} It was
also at this point in Chinese history that nationalism became an emotional,
simple, and unifying force which enabled large masses of people to comprehend
the most immediate national priority. In this sense, Sun simplified the
complicated doctrine of nationalism to one clear idea – overthrow the
Manchus.

It was also noteworthy that even though Sun was against both the
Manchus and the imperialists, he placed less criticism towards the latter. One
reason was his concern to simplify an ethnic nationalism and another was his
need for foreign support and funding in carrying out the revolution. Sun had
too many competitors. Most of the time he had to compete for funding with

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item Levenson, Liang Chi-Chao and the mind of modern China, p136
\item Ibíd., p145
\item Zhang Yaojie 张耀杰, “Sun Yatsen de shuangchong guoji yu liangtao huayu” 《孙中山的双重国籍与两套话语》, The Economic Observer 《经济观察报》, 2011-6-27.
\item <http://www.chinaelections.org/newsinfo.asp?newsid=209730>
\item Sidney H. Chang & Leonard H.D. Gordon, p102
\item Tang, p145
\end{thebibliography}
non-revolutionary groups, namely the Society to Protect the Emperor, which was established in exile by Liang’s teacher Kang Youwei and headed by Liang himself in 1898 after their failed reform the same year. With the young reform-minded Guangxu emperor, who represented the constitutional monarchy visions that many conservative intellectuals held at home and abroad, under house arrest, Sun was facing severe challenges for his support domestically. As an alternative strategy, Sun tried to solicit support of foreign powers, particularly Japan, the United States, Britain, and France to fund his revolutionary activities against the Manchu government.\(^{40}\) Again, he knew his priorities and that was why he regarded imperialistic powers as less evil to the Manchu government before 1911. Therefore, formulating his nationalist argument in terms designed to appeal to western supporters was one of the tactics he frequently used when necessary.

Another important tactic Sun used to win support through his pragmatism was to prioritize an anti-Manchu nationalism before supporting Liang’s broad nationalist idea. As mentioned before, the first major difference between Liang’s and Sun’s take on nationalism was the scope of it. From the late 1800s up to the revolution, Sun was consistent with his idea of an ethnic-nationalism, overthrowing the Manchus. It was during that time that Sun’s Han nationalism was distinct from Liang’s state nationalism. Shortly after the 1911 Revolution, Sun and other nationalist leaders began to reject ethnic nationalism, embracing all ethnic groups into the Han community. Sun proclaimed to establish a “united Chinese Republic in order that all the peoples – Manchus, Mongols, Tibetans, Tartars, and Chinese – should constitute a single powerful nation.”\(^{41}\) The Provisional Law of the Republic in 1912 particularly identified Mongolia, Tibet, and Qinghai as integral parts of the country, even if these territories were additions to the Qing created by the Manchus.\(^{42}\) Successive Chinese constitutions therefore defined China as a multi-ethnic state. Eventually, Sun called for a creation of a “melting-pot nationalism” that resembled the one in North America.\(^{43}\)

Looking back, the nationalism Sun Yatsen promoted right after the

\(^{40}\) Cheng, p143

\(^{41}\) Cheng, p55


\(^{43}\) Harris, p134
revolution was not after all very different from Liang’s “broad nationalism.” The ultimate difference lies in how history defines Liang and Sun – on one hand a sensitive intellectual, on the other a pragmatic politician. Perhaps Sun’s political tactics echoed to Liang’s calling him “unscrupulous.” Upon learning Sun’s last words on his deathbed in 1925 were “peace,” “struggle,” and “save China,” Liang was shaken and deeply grieved, and commented, “this [his life] was worth a masterpiece.”

No matter how intense their debates used to be and no matter how harshly they each criticized the other, they both contributed to each other’s thought on the development of modern Chinese nationalism and neither of their efforts can be overlooked.

**Thoughts make Philosophy, Thinkers make History**

Undoubtedly, both Sun and Liang created Chinese awareness of nationalism in a modern world. Sun’s nationalism did not fade away after the Republic of China was founded. The works of Liang reflected the intellectuals of his generation who were suddenly exposed to the world beyond the Middle Kingdom. Sun and Liang were among many others who travelled widely outside China. In Peter Harris’ words, “they were caught in a melee of conflicting perspectives.”

When commenting on Sun’s and Liang’s interpretations of nationalism, Xizhang Xie, a contemporary Chinese scholar, provided an insightful view: their approach to nationalism could be seen as answers to a broad political question, and in fact, their goals could be one and the same, but their sacrifices and options at each stage of China’s modernization produced vast differences. Liang abandoned culturalism for modern nationalism in the first place, transforming the idea of tianxia to state nationalism. Sun on the other hand, linked an anti-Manchu sentiment to a republican revolution, combining an ethnic revolution with his political objectives.

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45 Harris, p128

Despite their differences on the scope of nationalism and the interpretation of the paths to achieve that nationalism, Sun and Liang shared many similarities in borrowing Western philosophy to legitimize modern Chinese nationalism, and as a result of these characteristics, Sun’s personal charisma and pragmatism in defining political priorities led to the downfall of the Manchu government. Liang’s vulnerable and susceptible personality disappointed many of his supporters, who gradually switched sides for Sun’s revolutionary cause prior to 1911. Apart from Liang’s weaknesses, we still need to recognize his contribution in shaping the initial idea of Chinese nationalism and realize that his vision of nationalism could have been better applied under a different historical context and time.

As forerunners of the modern Chinese identity, both Liang Qichao and Sun Yatsen achieved successes in ending China’s last dynasty with thousands of failures intertwined in the process. However, their visions were limited by history, not by their carelessness. They were, after all, trapped in a limited historical dimension that should not be called shortsightedness. I would end with Levenson’s quote, which inspired the creation of this essay in the first place: “philosophy deals with thought, but history deals with thinkers. We may expect pragmatic and romantic ideas both to emerge in a single society” and “sometimes history demands what philosophy will not permit, the attempted compromise of two mutually exclusive premises. That was China’s dilemma [at the dawn of the revolution].” Nationalism, thus, became both the cause of and the solution to the dilemma.

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47 Levenson, *Liang Chi-Chao and the mind of modern China*, p151