CHAPTER FOUR

SALVATION OF THE STATE AND RACE:
SOCIAL DARWINISM AT THE DAWN OF THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY

Liang Qichao as the Main Authority on ‘Progress and Civilization’

When the saga of the Tongnip Sinmun was drawing closer to its end, an unlikely Chinese guest writer—China being normally associated with ‘barbarity’ and stigmatised as ‘the sick man of the East’ by the newspaper’s contributors—found a place for himself on its editorial pages. It was Liang Qichao (1873–1929), the Chinese reformer, who, together with his venerated mentor Kang Youwei (1858–1927) was among the main ideologues and practical promoters of the Hundred Days’ Reforms (11 June to 21 September 1898) in China and then had to flee to Japan for his life. The newspaper for reform-minded Chinese diaspora and overseas students, Qingyibao, that Liang began to print in Yokohama from December 23, 1898, was well-known to the modernity-oriented segment of Korea’s educated public as well. It was one of its eloquent editorials in classical Chinese, Aiguoshuo (On Patriotism), that was first spotted and reprinted in abridged form by the more middle-of-the-road and circumspect Hwangsŏng Sinmun (March 17–18, 1899) in a form which preserved the original text almost in its entirety (only the grammatical particles and endings were partly Korean).¹ Then it was selectively translated into a more vernacular, Chinese character-free Korean and republished by the Tongnip Sinmun on July 27–28, 1899.² It is not difficult to understand the reasons why this editorial became popular enough with the Korean reformist public to be republished in Korea twice in one year. In good Social Darwinist fashion, the editorial derived patriotism—itself one of the guarantees of a nation’s ‘survival’ in the world of power politics—from the ethics of competition. Liang Qichao ascribed Europeans’

² Tongnip Sinmun, Vol. 6, Pp. 89–94.
perceived tendency to be more patriotic than the Chinese to Europe’s long (from the times of ancient Greece on) history of interstate warfare and the lack of patriotism among the Chinese—to China’s early unification, which precluded the development of a ‘competitive and patriotic spirit.’ Liang Qichao hoped, however, that the humiliations to which the Chinese emigrants were subject in Hawaii, colonial Indonesia or any other ‘White-dominated’ part of Asia, would eventually teach Chinese the virtue of loving one’s own country and sacrificing for its sake—for ‘your human rights are gone if your state is gone.’

‘Patriotism for the sake of survival’ was for a long time the Tongnip Sinmun’s own pet theme. Thus, Liang Qichao’s observation that the Chinese ‘became gradually more aware of the importance of love towards one’s country only after being dealt a succession of defeats during the Sino-Japanese War’ and being then threatened with partition by the Western powers could not but strike a sympathetic cord among Koreans. After all, their own country hung precariously in the balance in the face of Japanese and Russian expansionist ambitions. Then, undeniably, another element in Liang’s popularity was his stylistics—the mood of ‘righteous indignation’ (pibun kanggae), lofty words on ‘patriotism,’ ‘sacrifice’ and ‘treason,’ gloomy warnings about the coming doom and grandiloquent paeans to the ‘martyrs for the nation’s sake’ held sentimental appeal for Korea’s own early nationalists. However, with some rare exceptions, Liang Qichao was not much translated and published in Korea between 1900 and 1905. After the suppression of the Independence Club, the non-governmental reformist movements in Korea entered into a hibernation period until 1905–1906, as Kojong’s government was launching its bid to rebuild Korea into an absolute monarchy that would not tolerate any sort of political activism from below.

The situation changed decisively after the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in February 1904, as the Japanese occupation of the peninsula worked to weaken King Kojong’s position and forced him to tolerate more of his subjects’ participation in debating clubs and political societies, and even clandestinely support some of them, in order to offset the onslaught of openly pro-Japanese elements. Though Tongnip Sinmun was discontinued by the government on December 4, 1899, a

---

3 See the original version in: Liang Qichao, Yinbingshi heji [Collected Writings from an Ice-drinker’s Studio] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju chuban, 1996), Part 1, Book 3, Pp. 65–77.