Introduction: Liang Qichao and Japan

During the summer of 1993, I attended some of the initial monthly meetings of Professor Hazama Naoki’s research seminar at Kyoto University. Breaking with custom, he had selected a Sino-Japanese theme, rather than a strictly Chinese historical one, for the subsequent three-year period: the role of Japan as an intermediary in Liang Qichao’s (1873–1929) understanding of modern Western civilization. While this was not an altogether new theme—everyone knew that Liang had spent more than a decade in Japan, beginning with his exile there in 1898, had written voluminously while there, and had certainly been influenced by the experience—the precise nature and actual mode of that influence had not been clearly delineated nor by any means fully understood.

We knew that Liang read many Japanese books that “influenced” him; we knew that he popularized countless two-character Chinese expressions thought to have been coined in Japanese in his serial publications; and we had an idea that he learned much of what he did about the West through Japanese translations of Western works. However, direct connections remained murky at best. Three biographical studies of Liang had already appeared in English and a fourth was soon to come out, but even in Philip Huang’s excellent work—the most sophisticated in treating the Japanese connection—this linkage was still vague.¹

I was therefore fascinated to hear these early seminar presentations in Kyoto that summer and the next. During the academic year 1996–97, as visiting professor at Kyoto University’s Research Institute for the Humanities, I was privileged to participate for a full year, the final extended year, in the seminar. The experience was both mind opening and exhilarating. Liang Qichao will never appear the same.

It struck me that, because of an abiding interest in Liang Qichao and the entire generation of the 1898 Reform Movement in the West, the timing was right to organize an international conference to address the very topic Professor Hazama had taken up but with the addition of Western and Chinese scholars. With funding from the Japan Foundation and the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange, we were able to invite to Santa Barbara, California, eight Japanese scholars (five from the original research group in the Kyoto area and three from the Tokyo area), two scholars from Taiwan, one scholar from the People’s Republic of China, one from Australia, one from France, and one from the United States. In addition, we were fortunate enough to have six bilingual or effectively bilingual commentators. The result was a highly successful international symposium.

The one serious problem confronting an editor of essays from a genuinely international conference is the challenge of having the non-English-language papers translated into readable, scholarly English with all the scholarly apparatus required on this side of the Pacific. That, we believe, has been achieved, though it has taken two solid years of working and reworking the East Asian-language contributions. In the interim, the final papers from Professor Hazama’s seminar have appeared: Kyōdō kenkyū: Ryō Keichō, Seiyō kindai shisō juyō to Meiji Nihon (Collaborative research on Liang Qichao: Meiji Japan and the reception of modern Western thought). Translations of the Japanese text have already been published in Chinese as well. The present collection of essays makes an excellent companion volume to Hazama’s, be it in the Japanese original or in Chinese translation.

A number of interconnected themes link the essays in this volume to one another and to the overarching theme of Liang and Meiji Japan. In light of the voraciousness with which Liang consumed the writings to which he was exposed in Japan, it is important to note that he came at a specific time and with a specific agenda of his own that strongly conditioned the nature of his experience there. Liang had left China, as we know, under extraordinary circumstances. There was a price on his head, the same price for which a number

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2 Most recently, see Peter Zarrow and Rebecca E. Karl, eds., Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period: Political and Cultural Change in Late Qing China (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002). Earlier works in English include Paul A. Cohen and John E. Schrecker, eds., Reform in Nineteenth-Century China (Cambridge: East Asian Research Center, Harvard University, 1976).


4 Liang Qichao, Mingzhi Riben, Xifang (Liang Qichao, Meiji Japan, the West Report of the joint research of the Institute in the Humanities, Kyoto University, Japan) (Beijing; Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2001).