



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

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Abstract:

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

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

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

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