

Liang, Qichao

By [Clemens Büttner](#)



Liang Qichao

Liang Qichao was a Chinese intellectual who supported Chinese involvement in World War One as a way to improve China's international image and national equality. He was a proponent of social Darwinism although later in his life he turned towards Asian spiritual traditions, becoming more critical of western modernism following the horrors of WWI.

Unknown photographer: MinistroDeJusticiaLiangQichao, black-and-white image, n.p., 1917; source: Wikimedia Commons,

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Liang, *Qichao*

Chinese journalist and political activist

Born 23 February 1873 in Xinhui, Qing Empire

Died 19 January 1929 in Beijing, Republic of China

Summary

Liang Qichao was the driving intellectual force behind the Chinese decision to join the First World War, hoping that China thus could gain national equality and international recognition. When these hopes were shattered at the Paris Peace Conference, Liang began to argue that a cure to the excesses of Western materialism could be found in traditional Asian spiritual

thinking.

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Early Political Activism

Liang Qichao (1873-1929) rose to prominence in the waning years of the Qing Empire (1644-1911). He was one of the leading voices of the 1898 Hundred Days' Reforms (*Wuxu Bianfa*) that aimed to reinvigorate [China](#) by transforming the struggling empire into a constitutional monarchy. When court conservatives thwarted these efforts, Liang had to flee to [Japan](#), where he stayed until the overthrow of the Qing Empire and the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912. While in exile, Liang became a vocal critic of Chinese traditional thought and a staunch proponent of Western Social Darwinist notions of human progress. His prolific journalistic work was widely circulated in China and turned Liang into the foremost Chinese intellectual leader of the first two decades of the 20th century.

China's Entry into the War

As a keen observer of world politics, Liang realized in the early 1910s that tensions between the European great powers were growing. He recommended that China make use of this situation to strive for national equality and international recognition,¹ yet despite briefly serving as China's minister of justice (September 1913-February 1914), his influence on Republican politics initially remained low. Shortly after the outbreak of war in Europe, Liang tried to influence both Chinese public opinion and the [government](#) by journalistic means. In late 1914, he published a monograph entitled *Historical Discussion of the War in Europe* in which he predicted [Germany's](#) victory on the grounds of the supposedly outstanding qualities of its people.² In early 1915, following Japan's recent [occupation](#) of the German concession of Jiaozhou (Kiautschou) Bay and now considerably less convinced of a German victory, Liang began to call for a Chinese war contribution, hoping to thus awaken Chinese national consciousness and secure a seat at the table of a future post-war peace conference.³

At the same time, Liang Qichao privately urged high-ranking government officials to lead China into the war. Throughout the summer and autumn of 1914, Liang repeatedly met with President [Yuan Shikai](#), in office from 1912 to 1916, and argued that China could only hope to regain Jiaozhou Bay from Japan if it joined the war. Liang also stayed in close contact with [Duan Qirui](#), four-time prime minister and three-time army minister between March 1912 and October 1918. Even though Duan agreed with Liang's assessment of the situation, China remained officially [neutral](#) until 1917. On 8 February 1917, in reaction to the recent [United States](#) decision to break off diplomatic relations with Germany, Liang was called to Beijing by President [Li Yuanhong \(1864-1928\)](#), in office from 1916 to 1917, to advise the Chinese government on its further course of action. As a result, China submitted a note of protest to Germany, demanding the immediate cessation of unrestricted [submarine warfare](#).⁴

On 14 March 1917, China officially severed its diplomatic ties with Germany, but a Chinese declaration of war only followed on 18 August 1917. In the meantime, Liang continued to put pressure on the government by eloquently promoting the idea that China's entry into the war would result in an elevation of its international status and prestige and, ultimately, the permanent recovery of its lost sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁵

Voyage to Europe and Paris Peace Conference

After the Chinese declaration of war, Liang's political clout waned amidst domestic turbulence. In December 1918, he therefore accepted an invitation by the Chinese government to travel to Europe to participate in the [Paris Peace Conference](#) in a nonofficial function. Even though Liang insisted that his only aim was to influence the public opinion of other countries and to inform his compatriots of the conference's proceedings,⁶ he did, in fact, also advise the Chinese envoys to the United States, [V. K. Wellington Koo \(1888-1985\)](#); the [United Kingdom](#), [Alfred Sao-ke Sze \(1877-1958\)](#); and [France](#), [Hu Weide, \(1863-1933\)](#), who participated in the conference, and he met with President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) in March 1919.

While in Europe, Liang visited various countries to gain first-hand insight into the effects of the war. He was initially hopeful that the horrors of the world war and the Entente's victory would lead humanity towards justice, democracy, world peace and global cooperation,⁷ but the victorious powers' ruthless behavior at the peace conference convinced Liang that the Social Darwinist dictum of "might is right" continued to hold sway in international politics.⁸ Accordingly, Liang reversed his hitherto negative opinion of Asian traditional thinking and began to argue that it was a special responsibility of the Chinese people to share their

spiritual tradition with a world that was in dire need of a moral renewal.⁹

Travel Impressions from Europe and Chinese Intellectual Debates in the 1920s

During his stay in Europe, Liang developed the idea that humanity's salvation was dependent on the revival of Asian spiritual traditions, thus mirroring the deliberations of many other Asian observers at the time (e.g. the Japanese Buddhist [Watanabe Kaigyoku \(1872-1933\)](#) or the Indian writer [Rabindranath Tagore \(1861-1941\)](#)). Upon his return to China in March 1920, he began to promote his new views by publishing his lengthy report, *Travel Impressions from Europe*, in Beijing and Shanghai newspapers. Liang recounted his time in Europe and argued that the horrors of the First World War were the result of the fundamental flaws of the Western modernization model. In the West, too firm a belief in the omnipotence of [science](#) had led to a neglect of questions of morality, and an overemphasis on nationalistic ideals had inhibited the development of individualism and cosmopolitanism. By contrast, emphasized Liang, Asia's spiritual traditions were especially suited to remedy these flaws.¹⁰

Liang's limited criticism of science, his appreciation of Asia's spiritual traditions and his skepticism of [nationalism](#) put him at insurmountable odds with the most powerful socio-political trends of his time, the New Culture Movement (*Xin Wenhua Yundong*) of the 1910s and the nationalistic [May Fourth Movement](#) (*Wu-Si Yundong*). Until his death in 1929, Liang would continue to promote the ideas in *Travel Impressions from Europe*, but he would never regain the intellectual influence he had enjoyed in the first two decades of the 20th century.

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Notes

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2. Liang, Qichao: Ouzhou zhanyi shilun [Historical Discussion of the War in Europe], Shanghai 1914 (see Lin, Yinbingshi heji 1936, zhuanji 8, juan 30). ↑
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- [Lee, Soonyi: In revolt against positivism, the discovery of culture. The Liang Qichao Group's cultural conservatism in China after the First World War, in: Twentieth-Century China 44/3, 2019, pp. 288-304.](#)
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- [Lee, Soonyi: In Revolt against Positivism, the Discovery of Culture. The Liang Qichao Group's Cultural Conservatism in China after the First World War, in: Twentieth-Century China 44/3, 2019, pp. 288-304. \(Article\)](#)
- [Liang Ch'i-chao \(梁啟超\) and the Garden of Myriad Lives Gathering, February 2022 \(Chinese-Heritage\) \(Image\)](#)
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