Between the “West” and the “World”: European Travelogue and Liang Qichao’s Localization of Global Modernity

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Abstract. This article examines how Liang Qichao, through his European *Travelogue* responded to the crisis of modernity that the West faced after World War I, within the global context of modernity. This prompted Chinese intellectuals to re-examine the Western model. The article primarily employs close textual analysis and cross-textual comparison, combined with reference to original European thought. The main findings of this paper are twofold: First, Liang no longer regards the "West" as a single template, but rather views countries such as Britain, France, and Germany as diverse scenarios, advocating for a reconciliation between material and spiritual civilization. Second, he distilled Confucianism, Taoism, and other traditions into "local knowledge" that can participate in international dialogue, thus practicing localized globalization. Third, he both accepted and creatively misinterpreted and adapted the ideas of Bergson and other Western thinkers, forming a cross-cultural dialogue paradigm. This study shows that Liang Qichao's later practices were neither blind wholesale Westernization nor conservative restoration, but rather a proactive, localized modernization strategy, this provides a historical reference for understanding the participation of modern Chinese intellectuals in global discourse on modernity and contemporary theories of localized globalization.

Keywords: Liang Qichao; *European Travelogue*; Modernity; Localization.

1. Introduction

Modern China faced not only issues concerning national survival or institutional reform, but also a profound global debate about civilization, values, and knowledge. As a leading figure in the Hundred Days' Reform in the late Qing Dynasty and one of the representative figures of the early constitutionalists, Liang Qichao was also committed to reform and strengthening China in his early years. He learned advanced Western political systems and management methods and tried to change China's situation with a reform model of "Chinese learning as the foundation, Western learning for practical application or complete Westernization". After Liang Qichao traveled to Europe and witnessed firsthand the state of Europe after the war, he realized that simply introducing Western learning was not a panacea. "Based on this issue, Liang Qichao conducted in-depth thinking on the numerous problems that emerged during the transformation from traditional Chinese society to modern society.” [1]. In his *European Travelogue* Liang Qichao placed his experiences within the context of global modernity, discussing the selective absorption and transformation of foreign resources. "He warned people not to rush and opposed the implementation of excessive nationalization policies in China; he advocated that Chinese culture should take the path of combining Chinese and Western cultures in the future, that China should be responsible to the world, and proposed a localized civilization plan with a cosmopolitan cause by using the discourse strategy of traditional culture."[2].

This article uses close reading and cross-textual comparison to break through the traditional interpretation that places Liang Qichao himself in the single framework of "Chinese-Western dualism," demonstrating his sensitivity to and strategic response to global modernity. Secondly, it proposes the analytical paradigm of "the global value of local knowledge," emphasizing the active role of non-Western intellectual resources in the reconstruction of global modernity discourse. Third, it emphasizes the methodological value of written language and literary allusions in the study of intellectual history, revealing how rhetoric, style, and allusions became key mediums for Liang

Qichao's discourse on cosmopolitanism. Methodologically, this paper mainly focuses on a close reading of European Travelogue and related texts (Collected Works of Yinbingshi, letters, etc.) and a comparative reading of the original European thought texts involved. This article aims to present the view that Liang Qichao was not simply a follower of the "West" or a complete Westernizer. European Travelogue reflects a localized cosmopolitan attempt—to offer a shared answer to the question of civilization by using the Chinese language and traditional resources, amidst the division of the "West" and global modernity.

2. Liang Qichao's View of the "West"

"The transformation of Liang Qichao's thoughts was influenced by the expectations and impact of the social environment."[3]. After the First Opium War, China embarked on a long road to modernization. After being exposed to advanced Western science and technology, some officials of the Qing government who were involved in the Self-Strengthening Movement began to adopt the principle of "Chinese learning as the foundation, Western learning for practical application"—learning Western scientific and production technologies without changing their own political system. However, the defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War made clear-headed intellectuals realize that merely mastering science and technology was insufficient to change China's impoverished and weak state. Intellectuals, including reformers, advocated for reform, which meant learning from Western political systems. Based on this, the idea of "complete Westernization" emerged, which summarized the modernization orientation of the reformers. Liang Qichao was also a supporter of this idea in his early years. But Liang Qichao's thinking did not stop there.

After the Hundred Days' Reform, his ideas changed. "Liang Qichao was constantly exploring ways out and his thoughts underwent several innovations and transformations."[4]. He acknowledged the achievements of Western culture and technology, but also began to be wary of its limitations. "The West is not perfect. Although its economy and technology are advanced, it is full of social contradictions and people are in a crisis of life and spirit. "[5]. As he wrote, "Modern people, due to the development of science, have experienced the Industrial Revolution, and their external lives have changed drastically, causing their internal lives to be shaken. This is easy to see. "[6]. He reflected on the worship of science and said frankly: "Europeans have dreamt of the omnipotence of science, but now they are calling science bankrupt."[6]. Based on this, his thinking shifted from the previous radical "complete Westernization" to a more cautious stance. While actively absorbing Western technology and systems, it was necessary to rebuild spiritual civilization and use traditional cultures such as Confucianism and Taoism to repair the institutional and spiritual gaps that emerged in the process of modernization.

After the Xinhai Revolution, Liang Qichao also held a position in Yuan Shikai's Beiyang government. During this period, China's politics remained chaotic and disorderly, with numerous warlords still controlling various regions. "Liang Qichao also gradually realized that the real purpose of those in power was not to establish the democratic regime he longed for, and that top-down reforms could not solve China’s practical problems."[7]. After that, Liang Qichao traveled to and witnessed post-World War I Europe, and he realized that the development of Western capitalism had entered a bottleneck." The large-scale machine production model after the Industrial Revolution led to a widening gap between the rich and the poor. Material development continued to move forward, but the contradictions between workers and capitalists intensified, and the oppression of workers became more and more severe. Workers in various countries began to launch strikes."[8]. These various negative phenomena all indicated the problems existing in capitalist society at the time, which led to a significant change in Liang Qichao's "view of the West." After delving into different countries, he no longer regarded the "West" as a single, replicable template, but rather distinguished between countries such as England, France, Germany, Russia, and Italy as "distinctive sites of knowledge and institutions." They assessed the balance of political systems, ideologies, material civilization in each country, and proposed differentiated strategies for learning from them. In this regard, Liang

specifically affirmed the political development path of Britain. "It is pointed out that the various rights in Britain in the past were still the exclusive property of a very small number of nobles, and gradually they were shared by the middle class... Britain is the best example, and other countries are also increasingly following the same trend..."[6]. It is evident that Liang did not advocate wholesale Westernization or complete rejection of the West, but rather advocated selective learning based on the characteristics of different countries: when industrialization and institutional development were needed, the practices of Britain in terms of market and legal systems could be referenced. If we wish to rebuild public spirit and cultural awareness, we can draw on the experience of public cultural traditions in countries such as France.

More importantly, Liang Qichao focused on the core issues of material and spiritual civilization. In his travelogues, he repeatedly emphasized that while the West had achieved remarkable material success, it had also revealed an imbalance or emptiness in its spiritual realm. Correspondingly, although China is materially backward, our traditional literature contains the potential to repair the spiritual defects of modernity. Liang succinctly pointed out: "As long as human beings do not have a spiritual life, material life will of course not be a problem."[6]. This assertion provided the theoretical core for his later blueprint for modernization, which emphasized both material and spiritual aspects: while advocating the absorption of Western material civilization, it was also necessary to strengthen the reconstruction and enhancement of spiritual civilization.

In his re-evaluation of Chinese tradition, Liang did not advocate a return to antiquity or a closed-minded culturalism. In his travelogue of Europe, he repeatedly expressed a renewed understanding and affirmation of classical Chinese thought: "I have recently been reading some translated Chinese philosophy books and I always feel that they are profound and extensive. "[6]. This statement shows that after experiencing Western European civilization, he regained his trust in his own country’s cultural resources and believed that there were still resources to be explored in traditional Chinese philosophy and literature. Therefore, the path to modernization he proposed was a two-way absorption: on the one hand, it was necessary to absorb Western technology and systems to promote national material prosperity, and on the other hand, it was necessary to take the moral resources and ideas of local culture as the core of spiritual construction.

3. A Reinterpretation of Tradition

"Liang Qichao hoped to establish a world culture that integrates both Chinese and Western elements in order to promote world peace and thereby escape from the narrow and monolithic cultural perspective."[9]. For this very reason, Liang Qichao's reinterpretation of traditional Chinese thought differed from the conservatives' simplistic "veneration of Confucius and Mencius." It also differed from the prevailing "complete Westernization" of the time. He did not simply revive Confucianism and Taoism as symbols of national identity, but instead refined, reorganized, and expressed them in modern discourse the ethical resources and spiritual propositions that can address various modern problems, thus promoting local wisdom as a kind of "local knowledge" to the world. Readers can view his approach as localized globalization, a practice of participating in international dialogue on a local basis. While firmly upholding the foundation of traditional Chinese culture, Liang Qichao proactively responded to many problems brought about by industrialization, such as the expansion of materialism, the imbalance of spiritual life, and the excessive development of individualism.

3.1. A Reinterpretation of Problem-Oriented Approach

"Before 1919, Liang Qichao's main energy was focused on political research and intellectual enlightenment. After his European tour, Liang Qichao's intellectual journey underwent a great change, and he mainly focused on cultural education and academic research, especially the study of classical Chinese culture and books."[10]. In *European Travelogue* Liang Qichao frequently used these traditional texts to respond to modern issues; for example, he directly quoted the *Doctrine of the Mean* and proposed the concept of "fulfilling one's nature."—The *Doctrine of the Mean* begins with the best

sentence: 'Only those who are utterly sincere can fully realize their nature.' Let's borrow this and call it 'the principle of realizing one's nature.' This principle of realizing one's nature means to bring out each person's innate talents and abilities to their fullest potential. On a personal level, this is necessary so that one does not become a burden on the world, and everyone can be self-reliant, without burdening others or depending on others. As far as society is concerned, this is necessary, and then everyone will use their strengths to create and evolve automatically, and together they will form a strong nation and a progressive society. "[6]. It can be seen that he not only preserved the classical moral authority, but also universalized the object of self-cultivation from "ruler and minister" to "citizens", and regarded "self-cultivation" as the sociological foundation of national modernization. At the same time, he used "ideological liberation" as a procedural condition, emphasized the inclusion of traditional ethics into the discussion field of public reason, and "combined Western material civilization with Eastern spiritual civilization."[11]. This provided an institutionalized path for the modernization of Confucianism. "He broke away from the traditional interpretation framework of Confucianism, integrating Mencius' "Theory of Good Nature" with Buddhist theories of mind and nature, as well as Western liberal thought. He emphasized that the goodness within human nature is not a fixed state from birth but can continuously grow through actions. Thus, it provided a theoretical basis for "ordinary people becoming sages" and also broke the old notion that morality only belongs to a few by using Confucius' "Benevolence". He advocated for cultivating a new type of citizen with comprehensive development in morality, intelligence, and physical ability. He also incorporated Mencius' methods of self-cultivation and self-improvement into personal initiative and practical spirit, forming a training plan that relies on both self-awareness and social education, providing feasibility for cultivating ideal personalities."[12]. More importantly, Liang Qichao also made adjustments in terms of language and expression. He expressed classical ideas in more colloquial or semi-colloquial Chinese, reducing obscure ancient meanings and making classical language more accessible to the public. This textual strategy can both broaden the social acceptance of traditional discourse and allow us to gain a place in comparison and dialogue with Western discourse.

3.2. Harmonizing "Modern Illnesses" with Tradition

Liang Qichao's distinction between "spiritual civilization" and "material civilization" was not a simple opposition, but a strategic shift. He acknowledged that the material progress brought about by industrial civilization was indispensable, but at the same time, he was wary of the erosion of people's hearts and social relations by industrialization. This can be seen in the rampant utilitarianism and individualism brought about by industrialization and marketization, which in turn led to spiritual chaos and the decline of social morality. Faced with a dual crisis, Liang Qichao proposed using traditional ethical resources as spiritual support. He neither advocated a return to the ancient patriarchal order nor regarded traditional thought as a stumbling block to modernization. Taking Confucian benevolence and propriety as examples, Liang Qichao reconstructed them as norms for public responsibility, social trust, and education. The Taoist ideas of "non-action" and "nature" were applied to the reflection on mechanized society, emphasizing restraint, introspection and harmony, so as to resist the alienation and fast-paced life of industrial society. "Liang Qichao found that many concepts in 'Chinese learning' were the remedies to overcome this drawback."[13]. Thus, tradition is no longer an outdated obstacle to modernization, but becomes usable knowledge that regulates material progress and spiritual needs.

3.3. The Universalization Strategy of Selective Abstraction and Conceptual Reconstruction

Liang Qichao's idea of presenting local knowledge as having universal significance relied on two methods. The first was selective abstraction: Liang Qichao extracted core concepts such as "benevolence," "harmony," and "self-reflection" from Confucian texts and conceptualized them into categories that could engage in dialogue with Western ethics and philosophy. In this process, Liang Qichao did not conduct word-for-word textual research. This abstraction allows traditional values to transcend the limitations of their time and emerge as a general solution to modernity. Secondly, it

involves interpreting ancient meanings using modern language. Liang Qichao further guided understanding by retranslating ancient meanings and using contemporary vocabulary. He interpreted "Li" as social rules and public etiquette education, and "Dao" as the philosophy of life and the principles of social harmony. Through these interpretations, Liang Qichao placed traditional concepts within the context of modern political and social issues, enabling traditional thought to be translated into modern language and facilitating discussion and understanding in intellectual exchange.

3.4. Two-way Participation in Localized Globalization

Liang Qichao did not aim to export the nation's wisdom to the world; instead, he focused on two-way communication. While drawing on Western systems and science, he also proposed local culture as a remedy for the modernity issues of the West. At the same time, he had interactive ideas with the German philosopher and historian Wendel Band, discussing the relationship between modernity and historical perspective. Wendel Band emphasized the boundary between "understanding" and "interpretation" "vgl." (in German literature) [14], and Liang Qichao resonated with this, shifting the focus of historical research from seeking universal laws to in-depth studies of different cultures. Based on this ideological shift, he formed the view of opposing mechanical transplantation of Westernization completely, not blindly adhering to tradition, and advocating selective borrowing while respecting history. He believed that Confucian, Taoist thoughts and traditional literature were not burdens of modernization, but important resources for restoring the spiritual imbalance and cultural consciousness that emerged during modernization. Thus, the modernization path he proposed emphasized the equal importance of material civilization and spiritual civilization, through the promotion of systems, education and cultural reconstruction together, to form a more locally legitimate modernization plan.

In addition, Liang Qichao and Benedetto Croce (Italian Literature) discussed the relationship between culture and social development. Croce's view of "the unity of philosophy and history" advocated the integration of philosophical thinking into historical research and believed that historical facts should be grasped through spiritual reality [15]. This line of thought shares a theoretical connection with Liang Qichao's advocacy of "reconstructing historical narratives with philosophical thought" in his "New Historiography." This allows Liang's ideas to extend beyond the institutional level, placing greater emphasis on the humanistic spirit behind culture. This provides theoretical support for strengthening cultural confidence in China's modernization process.

4. Liang Qichao's Innovative Use of Modern Discourse

4.1. Mixed Use of Language Styles

In the same chapter of Liang Qichao's work, we find his extensive use of classical Chinese intonation and vernacular Chinese. Classical Chinese sentence structures and allusions are frequently used to establish the authority of the arguments, while vernacular Chinese and popular metaphors serve a broad audience. For example, when discussing spiritual civilization, he often first explains the historical origins in classical Chinese, and then uses vernacular Chinese to cite examples of modern industry and urban life, so that readers can feel the current crisis. This enhances the credibility of his arguments and also broadens his audience. This facilitated the exchange between "elite discourse and mass communication." Furthermore, Liang Qichao habitually juxtaposed "Western phenomena" with "Chinese allusions" to achieve a contrasting and complementary effect, and then added a comparative structure: for example, "material civilization" was developed in parallel sentences to "spiritual civilization," which could both elaborate on the problem and explain the solution. Liang Qichao also frequently used metaphors and allegories to compare modern machine society to a "mechanical body" and spiritual culture to a "heart" or "circulation of blood." These metaphors could concretize the abstract crisis of modernity, making it easier to address ethically. Through these rhetoric, Liang Qichao transformed complex philosophical propositions into concrete issues that were accessible to a wider audience and could be understood by more people.

Meanwhile, in *European Travelogue*, Liang Qichao quotes imagery from the *Analects* and *Zhuangzi*, pairing it with modern terms such as "factory," "railway," and "democracy." This allows traditional resources to respond to contemporary issues across time. By reinterpreting classical allusions and then abstracting their meanings, he imbues ancient sayings with new semantics. For example, he extends "self-cultivation" to civic virtue, and interprets "non-action" as a critical restraint against mechanized utilitarianism. This intertextuality not only enhances the cultural coherence of the discourse but also makes tradition an effective argument for participating in global debates.

4.2. Translation Strategies and Creative Misinterpretation

When introducing Western ideas such as Bergson's, Liang Qichao often adopted a strategy of simultaneous interpretation, rewriting, and annotation. On the one hand, he used colloquial vocabulary to introduce foreign concepts into the Chinese linguistic register; on the other hand, he connected the concepts with Confucian and Taoist terminology through annotations or analogies. The intuitive theory of creation, first proposed by Bergson in France, was largely similar to that proposed by Wöcken in Germany. Bergson used the scientific principle of evolution as a starting point, saying that all phenomena in the universe are constituted by the flow of consciousness; something is born and then dies, and something dies and then is born again. This cycle of birth and death is what constitutes evolution. "This 'flow of consciousness' is called 'spiritual life,' and it comes from introspection and intuition. Since we know that change and flow are the reality of the world, and we also know that the power of change and flow is in our own hands, we can naturally gain 'great fearlessness' and just strive forward. These insights can sweep away all doubts and disappointments, giving humanity a 'rejuvenating elixir'." [6] In the original text, Bergson's discourse belonged to explanations of stream of consciousness, time, intuition, etc., and was mainly descriptive and analytical philosophical propositions rather than direct ethical commands. However, Liang Qichao directly translated the philosophical explanatory statements into mobilizing ethical maxims ("Fearless", "The Rejuvenating Man"), turning "what is" into "how should it be done". This approach involves deliberate "creative misinterpretation." It's not a simple mistake, but a reinterpretation for localization, making new concepts operational within the Chinese context. The aim is to transform philosophical propositions into ethical practice suggestions, thereby integrating foreign ideas into Chinese society.

5. Liang Qichao's Interaction with European Thought

5.1. The Bergson Case

During his European tour, Liang Qichao came into contact with Bergson's "philosophy of life" and intuitionism. "Mr. Hu Qiuyuan said: "Bergsonism represents a reaction against scientism, and represents a kind of reflection or self-mockery of Western culture."[16]. Liang Qichao deeply understood this and repeatedly used his concepts of "intuition" and "the fluidity of time" in his essays and speeches to reflect on the tendencies of modern industrial society. He believes that contemporary society overly emphasizes quantification, efficiency and mechanization, and this one-sided orientation weakens the fluidity and creativity of life. Bergson understood time as a continuous, indivisible "continuity", while Liang Qichao regarded this idea as a powerful tool for criticizing the mechanical view of time and the coldness of utilitarianism.

Liang Qichao did not simply adopt Bergson's original meaning. Instead, he embedded Bergson's intuitive concept into the Chinese context and associated it with several spiritual resources of Confucianism, Confucianism and Taoism, thereby proposing specific cultural adjustment plans: While promoting science and technology and material civilization, it is necessary to restore and reconstruct the institutional and educational systems of spiritual life. This transformation has obvious characteristics of creative misinterpretation — Liang translated and reinterpreted the concepts, combined Bergson's philosophy with traditional Chinese ethics, retained the tension of criticizing

modernization and mechanization, and shifted the discussion from abstract philosophy back to the social practice level. He used concepts such as Confucian self-cultivation and Taoist non-action as benchmarks to examine the moral and cultural consequences of the modernization path, rather than engaging in metaphysical discussions.

5.2. Selective Acceptance and Critical Integration

Liang Qichao neither fully accepted nor completely rejected the ideas of positivism and social evolutionism. He believed that the scientific method was helpful for improving technology and perfecting systems, but he also worried that social issues would be treated simply as natural laws. Liang Qichao balanced this tendency with Confucian thought, advocating the simultaneous promotion of moral education and civic qualities in the process of change. Liang Qichao accepted ideas such as Hegelian idealism, but emphasized that these norms should be rooted in specific local cultures. Thus, he proposed the "localization" thought strategy, which retains its universal significance while achieving and testing these concepts through local language and institutions.

At the same time, Liang Qichao's cross-cultural practice has a clear set of steps. He first translated European ideas into Chinese. Then, he reinterpreted these ideas through commentaries, lectures, and newspapers. Subsequently, he incorporated the transformed ideas into Chinese classics and real-world issues. Finally, he disseminated these concepts to a wider public through media and social actions. During this process, Liang Qichao often gave new names to concepts and made comparisons. He viewed intentional misinterpretations as a means of knowledge innovation, by grafting different ideas and giving foreign concepts new life in the Chinese context.

This approach constitutes an early cross-cultural dialogue paradigm: it rejects simple admiration for Western learning, avoids old-fashioned exclusivism, and through critical absorption and local adaptation, proposes a solution for regulating the modernization path through cultural cultivation. The two core features of this paradigm are: 1. By selectively abstracting concepts and repositioning them within their context, foreign concepts can be integrated with local resources. 2. Academic language can be popularized through public media such as newspapers and lectures, making academic topics accessible to the general public. For contemporary theories of "localized globalization," Liang Qichao provides a historical reference: Non-Western wisdom, through creative misinterpretation and grafting, can both retain its cultural roots and participate in the reconstruction of global modern discourse, becoming a critical and constructive intellectual resource.

6. Conclusion

Through a close reading and comparison of *European Travelogue* and related texts, this article confirms that Liang Qichao did not blindly follow the "West," but rather adopted a strategic localized response in the context of the global crisis of modernity after World War I. On the one hand, he deconstructed the "West" into a diverse context and made differentiated references; on the other hand, he abstracted and reconstructed local ideas such as Confucianism and Taoism into "local knowledge" that could participate in international dialogue. He also localized foreign ideas through translation, mixed use of language styles, and "creative misreading" to make them operable. This leads to the conclusion that Liang Qichao's later thought constitutes an early form of "localized globalization" knowledge practice. It neither rejects the mechanical transplantation of wholesale Westernization nor falls into conservatism and closure. Instead, it places non-Western resources in the reconstruction of global modernity discourse through discourse strategies and public communication. The significance and impact of this study are as follows: First, it provides a historical case for understanding how modern Chinese intellectuals were able to critically absorb and creatively construct discourses in the global discourse field; second, it emphasizes the methodological value of language, rhetoric, and intertextuality in the study of intellectual history and translation history, and promotes interdisciplinary research perspectives; and third, it provides a historical reference for contemporary theories of "localized globalization" and enriches the theoretical resources of diverse modernities.

Future research should focus more on: 1. Reconstructing the path of Liang Qichao's thought dissemination and social impact through empirical investigations of archives and newspapers; 2. Comparative studies with contemporary Chinese and foreign intellectuals to clarify the commonalities and differences in localization practices; 3. Incorporating Liang's practices into a broader global knowledge network to explore how non-Western knowledge can reconstruct its global discourse status in a multicentric modernity.

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