

Exploring early 20th Century intellectualism's engagement with the West

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Wellington Koo and Wang Zhengting went to Versailles in 1919 hoping, as Rebecca Karl argues, “to see China emerge from its stage of weakness, disunity and humiliation”¹. In its desire to escape the shackles of imperialism and its attempt to establish a path out of socio-political crisis, China had much in common with other countries, not only Asian neighbours such as India but also further afield in places such as Poland. However, while the issues facing Chinese intellectuals can be distilled into imperialism and socio-political crisis, the responses to these concerns were not constrained to engaging with the outside world. China’s confrontation with imperialism led intellectuals to admire President Wilson, propagate universalism and develop a theory of race unity, but it also gave rise to anti-Manchu nationalism and saw men as Gu Hongming seek to establish a Confucian-centred “Spiritual East” to rival the Western civilization. By the time Koo and Wang returned empty-handed from Versailles, May Fourth nationalism had superseded any pan-Asian movement. While intellectuals had fleetingly looked overseas, both to the West and to other Asian countries for inspiration and partnership, the commitment to foreign ideas was no stronger than Wilson’s rhetorical position on national self-determination. China may have shared its state of imperialist oppression with other countries, but this, ultimately is of little significance. The situation was equally true of the general socio-political tumult afflicting early 20th century China. In this first effort at building a modern nation, intellectuals reconceptualized China’s international position, recalibrated its aims as a country and redeveloped the structure of state. Intellectuals such as Liang Qichao and Ma Jianzhong drew from western sources in their advocacy, while Hu Shi’s propagation of individualism also found its root in the West. However, there was also a strong effort to reinvigorate Confucian, particularly on the part of Gu Hongming. In as much as at any point in history there is a plurality of countries that are undergoing regime change, China was not alone in its concerns, but without approaching the impossible task of an extensive investigation of world history, no comment can be made on this aspect of the question. Nonetheless, it is clear enough that Chinese intellectuals reached overseas in their engagements with the issues of imperialism and socio-political crisis.

As one of the most pivotal issues facing China in the first years of the 20th century, imperialism elicited a wide range of response from intellectuals. But the first response was not to reach overseas. Instead, one of the most readily observed traits of this period was anti-Manchu nationalism, which

¹ Karl, Rebecca, ‘Creating Asia: China in the world at the beginning of the twentieth century’. *American Historical Review* 103.4 (1998) p.1348

emerged as a response to China's ever more obvious weakness in the face of foreign imperialism. This trend had been evident for some years, especially in the Boxer Rebellion, but it is notable that not until now did it have intellectual support. Men such as Lu Xun chopped off their queues, in defiance of Manchu attempts to control cultural conventions, while Qiu Jin is an example of a woman who rebelled against Qing stereotypes, rejecting bound feet, even cutting her hair short and wearing a Western-style suit. This anti-Manchism found a more political expression with Sun Yatsen, who attacked supporters of Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao for promoting reforms that would stabilise Manchu rule, rather than revolution, which would bring an end to Manchu rule. Support for the radical views of Sun grew throughout the first years of the 20th century until the Xinhai Revolution of 1911, after which the Qing emperor Puyi was deposed. The most obvious response to China's plight at the hands of imperialists had been to advocate regime change. But despite Manchu rule coming an end, China still cowered before imperialists. From this point the intellectual engagement with the outside world would become much more significant.

Despite the racial dichotomisation of the anti-Manchu movement that concluded with the Xinhai Revolution, racial discourses also formed an important part of intellectual attempts to build links with other countries and challenge the rule of imperialists. Initially, as Karl observes, the Chinese conception of an Asian race had been confined to the people that inhabited the land under Qing rule, but from the 1898 reforms onwards, intellectuals argued for a broadened concept of race. Zhang Zidong made the first step in identifying similarities with Japan in his *tongzhong* theory. Over the next five years, in their grappling with the concept of race, Zhang Binglin and others supported Zhang Zidong's theory, extending it throughout Asia, from Korea to Vietnam. By 1905, as Karl argues, the *tongzhong* was centred on "the shared threat of political annihilation"². This *tongzhong* was a device to unite peoples suffering from imperialism. At this early stage, though, the *tongzhong* was confined to Asia: Ou Jujia was prominent in arguing for strengthening what he perceived to be China's natural link with the Philippines, while the foundation of the Asian Solidarity Society came about due to the close links between Indian and Chinese students studying in Japan. This was not the universalism that later developed: Tang Tiaoding defined the *tongzhong* as Asians under imperialist oppression, while the Aryan race was extended beyond its traditional Germanic definition to cover the European imperialists in general. Tang was supported in this view by Li Shipei. In his 1907 report *On Recent Trends in Asia*, Liu Shipei observed, "Today's world is a world of brute force. And the territory of Asia is a ground upon which the white race uses its force... [W]e must eliminate their involvement in Asia"³. While race theory may have first come from Europeans such as Thomas Huxley, the Asian race theory that emerged in the years before World War I constituted a strategic response to the issue of imperialism. As Karl argues, finding that the *tongzhong* "depended for its vitality both on displacing would be hegemonic states and ideologies, as well as for contesting the emerging hegemony of Western power"⁴. This racialism was part of a realisation that Asia could better resist imperialism as one than as individual states.

The First World War had a critical impact on Chinese attempts to confront imperialism. It was due to the First World War that the Chinese anti-imperialist discourse moved past racialism: the coverage provided by new global news wires such as Reuters made intellectuals all over the world aware of

2 Karl p.1105

3 Karl pp.1115-16

4 Karl p.1117

the extent to which imperialism was a common experience, leading to the eruption of anti-imperialist movements in countries as diverse as Poland, Cuba and South Africa. The pan-Asianism of the years leading up the war had represented a broadening beyond a dichotomous world-view of “Chinese” and “foreign”, but intellectuals reconceptualised their China’s international position once more from 1914: the dichotomy was expanded into global imperialists and the global oppressed. The Asian discourse between Liang Qichao and Rabindranath Tagore was broadened to include Tolstoy and other European intellectuals. Still this remained a dichotomous, unnuanced view of the world.

More importantly, it was during World War I that universalist anti-imperialism seemed to have found itself a figurehead in President Wilson. Upon the conclusion of war, Wilson issued his Fourteen Points, declaring “‘Self-determination’ is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative of action, which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril”⁵. The former proponents of pan-Asianism rallied behind Wilsonian universalism: an editorial in the Shanghai Daily declared Wilson to be “a beacon of light for the world’s peoples”⁶. Hollington Tong said that Wilson was “kind-hearted in dealing with a weak and oppressed nation; just in his relationship with a strong power; and extremely severe in his treatment of predatory countries”⁷. The Chinese imagination of Wilson meant that he found disciples throughout the Chinese intellectual spectrum, with Kang Youwei in particular becoming a strong advocate of the League of Nations. Through Wilson, intellectuals thought, China could escape the wrath of imperialism and take its place among the nations of the world. But on May 4th 1919, news arrived in China that the German concessions had been awarded to the Japanese, and by the conclusion of the Paris Peace Conference, treaties had been negotiated ensuring independence for Turkey, Romania, Serbia and other European countries, but not for China, India, or any other non-Western country dealing with imperialism. As Erez Manela argues, the international Wilsonian movement is better thought of as the international Wilsonian moment. It is debatable whether “self-determination” was ever anything more than a rhetorical device for Wilson, but given the speed with which Chinese intellectuals devoted their attention to nationalism, the fortitude of their commitment to universalism is also doubtful.

Indeed, even prior to May Fourth, there is evidence to suggest that pan-Asianism and Wilsonian universalism were only tools employed by intellectuals whose remained essentially rooted in Confucianism. Gu Hongming advocated an Asianist “Spiritual East,” which was to be based on humanity-centred Confucianism, rather than Western materialism, which Gu regarded as a cause of war. Du Chunmei argues that along with Tagore and Okakura Kakuzo, Gu was a “cultural amphibian”⁸, describing how they were often immersed in multiple cultures. But this was an Asianist facade for a man who was actually committed to evangelizing on behalf of Chinese culture. He mocked Tagore, and rejected Tolstoy’s advocacy of boycotts. Instead of seriously committing himself to Asianism, he used Confucianism to prove that China was capable of “self-representation”⁹. According to Du, Gu’s

5 Manrela, Erez “Imagining Woodrow Wilson in Asia: Dreams of East-West Harmony and the Revolt Against Empire in 1919,” *American Historical Review* (2006) p.1332

6 Manrela p.1336

7 Manrela p.1340

8 Du, Chunmei, “Gu Hongming as a Cultural Amphibian: A Confucian Universalist Critique of Modern Western Civilization” *Journal of World History* 22.4 (2011) p.719

9 Du p.729

contemporaries considered him “xenophobic, reactionary and eccentric”¹⁰. But there are doubts too as to their desire to abandon tradition for the West: Hu Shi considered Wilson to be a “model of the Confucian ideal”¹¹, while Wellington Koo and Wang Zhengting declared the League of Nations to be “nothing less than the culmination of thousands of years of Confucian teachings”¹². Despite some adoption of Western ideologies and network-building with foreign countries, Chinese intellectuals prior to May Fourth remained rooted in Confucianism, even if the issues they struggled with were present overseas as well.

But imperialism was not the only issue that Chinese intellectuals grappled with in the early 20th century. Also of concern was the breakdown of the dynastic socio-political order, and it was in this arena that a much more diverse debate occurred among intellectuals. Initially, the instability contributed to the aforementioned anti-Manchu movement – the spate of queue-cutting in which Lu Xun took part can be seen as an attempt to mark a break with the past, and incite regime change by creation opposition to the cultural customs of the court and bringing western styles into fashion. However, this anti-Manchu and anti-Qing movement was countered by a pro-court movement: Gu made no qualms about his preference for a rejuvenated Confucianism, while arguably the two most prominent intellectuals of the period, Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, advocated reform as a means of keeping the Qing in power, rather than bringing about a change in regime. There were thus two choices facing Chinese intellectuals who sought a solution to the breakdown of socio-political order: look to the West, or look to tradition.

It had become clear to most intellectuals that the dynastic socio-political order needed alteration, and, in addition to Westernism versus traditionalism, another aspect to their response was statism versus non-statism. Statist intellectuals perceived China to be in transition from an imperial form, which conducted its foreign relations on a tribute basis, to a nation form, which interacted with other countries on a relatively level plane. Sun Yatsen in particular argued for the reconceptualisation of China as a participant in pan-Asianism, and was supported in this by Kang Youwei, who was a strong advocate of international bodies such as the League of Nations. If the transition from empire to nation was to be successful, intellectuals of this time thought, reforms would have to be made to governmental structure, as well as to the aims of government. For this, the source of inspiration was certainly the West. The earliest example of this was Ma Jianzhong, stationed in France in the late 19th century: he demanded that China adopt an intensive six-year training programme for its diplomats. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, up to that point, Chinese diplomats had been seen as curios rather than political representatives. If China was to be taken seriously as a modern nation, it would need well-trained diplomats. Secondly, the late Qing bureaucracy was ridden with corruption and nepotism. Instituting a training programme aimed at increasing professionalism would weed out those who had no qualifications beyond their lineage. Lastly, a modernised Zongli Yamen would serve as an example to the rest of the bureaucracy. It was fairly natural to advocate a modern, professional bureaucracy as a solution to socio-political disorder. Other examples of the campaign to reform the structure of government include the 1905 constitutional commission, in which Kang and Liang were heavily involved. In their attempt to stabilise government, the West provided the best example.

10 Du p.724

11 Manela, p.1340

12 Manela, p.1348

Beyond structural reforms, another dimension to the statist school was the realisation that the aims of government had to be recalibrated if the new nation was to be successful. Gu Hongming saw China as a spiritual society, but Ma Jianzhong, having experienced the Paris Exhibition, argued that the Western model should be copied if China was to reinvigorate its development. According to Ma, Europe's wealth originated from its protection of chambers of commerce, while its power "had as its guiding principle the gaining of popular support, and the implementation of these principles was at the heart of European orderliness". While he expressed disdain for the European obsession with technology, he also found that Europe "had the perfect way of governing." Rather than a Confucian state based on seeking spiritual refinement, China would be best off joining Europe in the pursuit of wealth and power.

However, the Chinese decline continued well into the 1900s. Younger intellectuals such as Lu Xun and Hu Shi had less faith in the ability of a state to resolve disorder. Both men were greatly influenced by the works of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. As Guo Zhanbo argued in the 1930s, "Hu with his Ibsenism attacked the ancient institutions of law, religion and feudalism in China that had stressed the family and largely ignored the importance of the individual"¹³. Rather than reforming the bureaucracy, Hu argued for a reformed society, with a much greater emphasis on civil liberties and rule of law. By guaranteeing the basic freedom of the people, the disorder afflicting politics would have fewer repercussions. Elizabeth Eide sees some connections between Hu's individualism and neo-Confucianism, namely in the emphasis on self-discipline, self-restraint and self-cultivation, but due to the fact that Hu was resolutely anti-statist, it is impossible to sustain this argument. That said, it is easy to overstate the degree to which Hu Shi's philosophy had its root overseas. As Eide rightly argues, Hu's reading of Ibsen was exceptionally didactic, to the extent that transmissions of Ibsen's works were more widely read in China than the works themselves. Hu used the authority of Ibsen to validate his philosophy before the general population. This upheld the tradition that literature serves as a "vehicle for the Way". For Hu, Ibsenism was a tool in developing a solution to socio-political disorder. He did not, as Eide recognises, advocate a "totalistic rejection"¹⁴ of Chinese culture, but rather used Western literature to form "part of an effort to reject elements of tradition inimical to progress"¹⁵ in much the same way that Ma, decades earlier, had borrowed from Western governmental practice. Whether or not Hu and Ma had partners in this practice overseas is a question for scholars of world history, but it may be said that their inclination to look to other countries to inspire their reform has its parallels in other places and in other points in history.

In conclusion, the two issues to which Chinese intellectuals devoted themselves to in the early 20th century with the most ardency were imperialism and socio-political disorder. In terms of imperialism, the intellectual response seemed to go through three stages of development: anti-Manchuism, pan-Asianism, and finally Wilsonian universalism. However, just as Wilson ultimately proved to be uncommitted to national self-determination, the Chinese commitment to regional interaction or international cooperation was equally weak: Gu Hongming preferred plans to establish China as a rival power to the West, while seeming advocates of a new appraisal of the outside world such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao were reluctant to leave Confucian tradition behind. While intellectuals did look overseas both in terms of seeking support and in terms of building networks, their

13 Eide, Elisabeth, *China's Ibsen: from Ibsen to Ibsenism*. London: Curzon, 1987 p.64

14 Eide p.148

15 Ibid.

lack of commitment to this, coupled with various instances of reversion to tradition diminish the significance of the intellectual engagement with the West with regards to the fight against imperialism. Equally, in the case of socio-political disorder, there are many examples of men such as Ma Jianzhong and Liang Qichao borrowing from Western governmental practice in their attempt to stabilise the domestic situation in China, but these men sought gradualist reform to the traditional system of rule, rather than a more far-reaching shift. Once more, the commitment to foreign ideas was limited. Even Hu Shi, who, as Elizabeth Eide argues, was comparatively thorough in his ideological transformation, actually only sought a gradualist approach to reform. He may have arrived at a different solution to Ma – namely individualism, but like all the other intellectuals of his time, Hu was not resolutely committed to foreign ideas in his search for solutions to China's problems. Only when Wellington Koo and Wang Zhengting emerged empty-handed from Versailles would Chinese intellectuals abandon tradition and advocate real change, and the nationalist fervour that would develop in the years after 1919 indicates that they did not much care whether their concerns were shared by their contemporaries in other countries.