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The Discourse of Xinmin: People-Making as Nation-Building in Early Twentieth Century China

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The Discourse of *Xinmin*:

People-Making as Nation-Building in Early Twentieth Century China

Qing Cao

Abstract

Focusing on Liang Qichao's campaign of moral character reform, this article examines the discourse of *xinmin* (新民) as a social engineering project of people-making as nation-building in the 1900s. Drawing on Koselleck's conceptual history, it analyses how the idea of *qun* (群) was deployed as a discursive building block of *xinmin* to cultivate a sense of membership in a political community of nation. It argues that the *xinmin* discourse facilitated a fundamental restructuring of the mental-cognitive framing of society in its attempt to shift China from a cultural entity to a political identity.

Key words

Xinmin Shuo 新民说; *Xinmin Congbao* 新民丛报; *tianxia* 天下*; qun* 群*;* nation-building 民族建设; Chinese nation 中华民族; Liang Qichao 梁启超

Introduction

Modern China has long been viewed as an anomaly in the world of nation-states, described by Lucian Pye (1992) as "a civilisation state" and John Fitzgerald (1995) as "a nationless state". It is without a doubt that China is precariously situated in the traditional Westphalian international system. Such an anomalous position evokes feelings of unease for both China and the west, largely due to expectation gaps regarding one another's values, institutions and practices. In the current literature, most studies tend to focus either on a perspective of modernity-centred progressive history or ideology-based liberal democracy in explaining the incongruity. Both perspectives are guided by a normative paradigm that assumes a teleological view of human destiny, with rare exceptions in works by Martin Jacques (2012) and Daniel Bell (2016). Moving away from these dominant perspectives, this article examines the contrived nature of China's efforts of nation-building by analysing the

discourse of *xinmin* (新民 new people[1]) in the final decade of the Qing Dynasty. It argues that the *xinmin* discourse modelled after the German concept of *volk* makes up part of the broader late Qing intellectual campaigns that contributed to the genesis of China's status as an anomalous nation-state. The idea of *xinmin* was first conceptualised by Liang Qichao in the journal *Xinmin Congbao* (新民丛报 New People Journal, 1902-07) that he launched with the aim of developing a nascent national consciousness. In this journal, Liang published his influential text *Xinmin Shuo* (新民说 On New People, 1902-06), a series of 20 articles over a period of six years. Written in the years before the 1911 Xinhai Revolution, these articles detailed a roadmap to transform China's traditional dynastic system into a Western-style nation-state. Liang's *xinmin* campaign has played a key role in catalysing a series of transformations in modern China - from traditional familism to European nationalism, from a social relationship-based communal identity to a politically-motivated national identity, and from a cultural imagining of *tianxia* (天下 all under the heaven) to a political imagining of nation-state.

Focusing on Liang's appropriation of European episteme in criticising Chinese traditions he deemed were sinking China to a state of disorder, this article examines the language Liang uses in radicalising the thinking of the literate public by dystopianising traditional China and romanticising European modernity. Liang's promotion of *xinmin* would not have been possible without a new lexicon that supplied him with "a new language" – a language that displaced Chinese traditional episteme (Levenson 1968) through the domesticated western ideas that they encoded. The new lexicon facilitated a restructuring of the mental-cognitive framing of society, and established a novel system of normative benchmarks grounded in European learning. Moreover, the new language conferred intellectual legitimacy to the European nation-state, deeming it universally applicable and offering the concept as an exclusive solution to China's predicament. I argue that Liang is assessed not in moralistic terms but rather as a key figure facilitating a fundamental intellectual transformation of modern China with his utopian discourse on *xinmin.* It is important to note that in Chinese revolutionary historiography (Hu, 1981), Liang is deemed a "reactionary". His name is synonymous with a conservative opposition to republican revolutions. Embedded in the same logic of progressive history, this assessment conforms to

[1] *Xinmin* 新民 can be understood as 'renewing people' or 'new people' because *xin* 新 could be used as a verb as well as an adjective. The primary use by Liang is an action verb, meaning rejuvenating people.

the normative paradigm, albeit in a Marxist rather than Hegelian vein. Li Zehou's (1996) rehabilitation of Liang in post-reform China from a conservative to a progressive thinker is grounded in a similar conceptual framework. Locating Liang in the genealogy of historical personalities pushing China onto the 'capitalist phase' of human emancipation from feudal entrapment, China's recent scholarship has re-engaged Liang in relation to European enlightenment, which was forbidden for discussion during the Maoist era.

Given the artificial nature of the concept of a nation-state, Hobsbawm (1990:18) suggests a productive way of understanding the genesis of a modern nation is to study the language that operates within key concepts in socio-political discourses. Focusing on the hitherto understudied *linguistic* mechanisms through which Chinese nation-state was built, this study considers the synchronic and diachronic semantics in modern Chinese lexicon. It investigates how Chinese characters were fused with new semantics embedded in European episteme in creating what Koselleck (2006:104) calls 'temporalisation of concepts'. In other words, how has temporalizing the past and future taken shape as new structures of semantics defined macroconcepts in modern China? In scrutinising the artificiality of nation-building as a process of people-making, I explore *xinmin* discourse as an imagining of future China modelled on the west, rather than against lived experiences of the past. Drawing on Koselleck's (2002, 2006) notion of conceptual history, I examine key terms underpinning the *xinmin* discourse. Koselleck (2011:13) highlights the totalising impact of the onset of modernity that subsumed traditional concepts into the realm of ideology. That is, traditional philosophies are overridden by events and changes in social structures, such that these concepts tend to be obliviated by the singularity of modern terms as hegemonic macroconcepts such as "progress" and "liberty". These dominant terms operate in a way that erases the pluralities of meaning intrinsic in the previous versions of these terms that accord them with specific sense, histories, experiences and contexts. It is the loss of specificities of meaning and lived experiences that give rise to the dominance of the singular use of many modern macroconcepts.

The discourse of xinmin: people-making as nation-building

Nation, as Gellner (2006, xxi) argues, is the product of nationalism; and nationalism the product of modernity. Nation and nationalism are functions of modernity – they are conducive to new structures of organising a modern society, which rely crucially on a political "imagined community" (Anderson 2006). Despite different conceptualisations, most

scholars believe language, history and religion are key to nation-building (Dawisha 2002). Nation-state's artificial nature leads to a utopian tendency as Hobsbawm (1983,13) argues, "the nation, with its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols, histories and the rest, all rest on exercises in social engineering which are often deliberate and always innovative, if only because historical novelty implies innovation". The idea of nation therefore largely exists in the symbolic world of representation, relying heavily on the power of storytelling. As Borneman (1992, 19) notes, nationalism is about constructing nation as an object of devotion. "Nationness" has to be embodied in everyday practice that produces a feeling of belonging, a sense of feeling being home. This forms the "national subjectivities" that Verdery (1993, 40) emphasizes which require a "homology between the nation and the individual". A form of self-experience as national has to be cultivated, so that the idea of nation is internalised and assimilated by the individual.

In China however, conceptions of nation are markedly different (Cao 2019). As a civilisation, China has shared the same written script and history in its vast territory for millennia. In the late Qing era, its population was larger than that of Europe (excluding Russia). Crucially, it also enjoyed a longstanding cultural tradition of Confucianism since the Western Han Dynasty (206BC-23). For Liang Qichao and his contemporaries, the challenge of nation-state-building were immense, but even more pressing was the concept of the state, and how people were loyal to, and identified themselves in relation to the state. This loyalty needed to be shifted from the family and emperor to the state. Hence the all-inclusive *tianxia* needed to be transformed to a modern state with a demarcated territory. The value of nation-building lies in its serviceability to state-building. It is in this sense that Liang developed an acute sense that China must see itself as a nation. His (2013, 10) definition of nation reads like a western textbook: "people living in different localities sharing the same race, language, religion and customs who see one another as fellow countrymen, striving for self-governance, organising a functional government, serving public interests and resisting invasions of foreign nations." Such a view is subversive to the established cultural order of *tianxia* and China's self-perception.

Tianxia is a primary concept in traditional epistemology recorded in classics such as *Shangshu* (尚书 The Book of Documents) and *Liji* (礼记 The Book of Rites)'. Before China's 221BC unification under Qin, the idea of *tianxia* had already become a central tenet of the political philosophy underpinning Chinese worldview. It is structurally inverted from

that of the European nation-state in that it deemed *tianxia* or "all under heaven" as the basic political unit against which to evaluate other political entities. The *tianxia* world-system is absent in Western political theory where the state is conceived as the basic unit of international relations. "The world" in the west is not a political concept but rather a geographical and spatial one. The most fundamental political issues in China were concerned *tianxia*, while in the west it was the individual who considered first and foremost. China's political order started with *tianxia*, which was then filtered through the state (国) and family (家) to the individual (身). The individual, however, is defined primarily by family relationships. Familial networks then interwove numerous kinship groups. Throughout Chinese history, kinship groups functioned as the basic unit of society. Within the kinship groups, an individual was embedded in a ramified structure that institutionalised social relations. Family became therefore the prototype for all human organisations, including that of the state. The *tianxia* political and ethical orders are thus intertwined - political legitimacy was based on an effective ethical order that ensured the survival of its composite communities. *Tianxia* as an all-encompassing framework of governance granted the ruler the power to deal with *all* political issues. The legitimacy of the ethical order, on the other hand, arose from basic interpersonal relationships. Key to the intertwined political and ethical systems – one from macro *tianxia* to the micro individual and the other the other way round – is not only that they complement each other, but they permeated all socio-political domains. Thus, a mutually reinforcing system was established with politics and ethics seamlessly interwoven – each meeting the intrinsic needs of the other. For China, the world (*tianxia*) without a centralised system of governance is a world of chaos ruled by might rather than right. Gaining territory does not mean gaining *tianxia*. Indeed, only when a ruler won the heart and mind of people, could he claim to have gained *tianxia*. Political legitimacy resides therefore in popular approval. This tradition, inaugurated in pre-Qin classics, is what Liang aimed to change with his *xinmin* discourse.

In transforming the subjectivity of belonging, *xinmin* discourse stresses individuals' obligation to the imagined community of strangers as fellow compatriots, rather than the family. Liang also tried to orient *xinmin* towards the nation as a congregation of individuals, rather than individual liberties. To this end, European ideas, institutions, histories, personalities and anecdotes are drawn to illustrate *public* moralities and how they coalesce individuals into a national community. These enlistments serve the purpose of collective-building in lieu of establishing individual autonomy. As a polemic text, *Xinmin Shuo*

deployed rhetoric and oratory to stimulate emotions as much as intellect, impeccably bridging the incongruence between external epistemology and domestic realities with textual constructions of authority, legitimacy and power. With his fingers on the pulse of the nation, Liang sensed the literati's incensed trepidation over cultural decline, ineptitude in the Manchu court, and the burning desire from the public for action and solutions. His fine-tuned rhetoric spoke to the anxieties and aspirations of the generation, as well as their longing for direction and purpose.

The *xinmin* discourse is modelled after *guomin* (国民 nation people) – a notion shaped by the German concept of *volk*. Liang draws heavily from the German political scientist Johann Kaspar Bluntschli (1808-81) who deals with the relationship between state and *volk* contextualised in the nineteenth century German nation-building. *Volk* as a people constituting a nation in Bluntschli's work is translated in Chinese as *guomin*. As the first scholar introducing systematically western state theory, Liang published the translation of Bluntschli's work in 1899 and 1903 that became central to Liang's intellectual repertoire. *Guomin,* the prototype of Liang's *xinmin,* gained currency in late Qing intellectual discourse after the 1894-5 Jiawu maritime war. In Chinese classics, *guomin* refers to people in a pre-Qin feudal principality. Its meaning evolved in the late nineteenth century, first indicating people in a foreign country; but after 1895 it began to refer to people in a modern nation state (Jin and Liu 2010, 509-12). This modern usage was derived from Meiji Japan's translations of European books on social sciences. While in exile in Japan, Liang took in extensive western knowledge including the concept of *guomin,* publishing a long-form text entitled *Guojia Lun* (国家论 On the State) as a serial in *Qingyibao* (清议报, 1998-1901) in 1899. *Guojia Lun* became the clearest articulation of what constitutes a modern state, nation and society. According to Bastid-Bruguiere (2004, 108), Liang's text is a translation of Bluntschli's 1874 *Deutsche Staatslehre fur Gebildetd* (German political science for the educated public). *Volk* was translated as *kokumin* in Japanese and *guomin* in Chinese; though in other translations *volk* was also expressed as *minzu* (民族 nation). Bastid-Bruguiere (2004:108) contends that Liang's *Guojia Lun* plagiarised Azuma Heiji's Chinese translation of the Japanese version of Bluntschli's book. In 1903, Liang published another long-form piece in two segments entitled 'Theories of the Great Political Scientist Bluntschli' in *Xinmin Congbao*, also taken from Azuma Heiji's translation. What is significant is not Liang's alleged plagiarism, but rather his embracement of Bluntschli's views on *volk*-based nation-building as state theory, including Bluntschli's criticism of Rousseau. Wary of the role of

liberty in China, Liang contended: 'China's most urgent need is organic unity and a powerful order. Liberty and equality are secondary' (Liang 1903). Unlike the Rousseaurian citizen, *xinmin* discourse accentuates state authority and emphasizes the imperative for people's allegiance to the nation-state.

Liang's *volk*-derived *xinmin* rhetoric marks a turning point in China's modern intellectual history. During the Self-Strengthening Movement from 1861-1895, Chinese intellectual elites gained western socio-political knowledge and technical skills under the mantra 'defeat the barbarians by learning from the barbarians'. Yet they evaded the contention surrounding the status of western learning in China by deeming it as having originated from the Chinese classics. This claim however became untenable after the 1895 Jiawu defeat. As the first scholar to break this mode of writing, Yan Fu (1853-1921) swept away the pretension that conceals the intellectual crisis with four powerful essays he published in 1895. Removing the self-deceit gave rise to a dilemma – should they accept the west as the genesis of ideas and therefore ultimate knowledge? This dilemma was intractable and remained unresolved throughout the twentieth century. In his writing, Liang adopted the strategy of conceptual evasion - he never explicitly criticised China's intellectual traditions, but instead condemned their practice from a social perspective. Unable to bring himself to attack Chinese values he cherished, Liang instead expressed disapproval of mainstream mentalities. His conceptual evasion is manifested in his passionate introduction of western values, institutions and practice in explaining why the west had prospered while China lagged behind.

His sharp criticism of Chinese 'ill practice' is located in his concept of "bad people" (人民顽劣) – a key position he held in his epic debate with the revolutionary publication *Minbao* (Cao 2017). Arguing for a constitutional monarchy as opposed to a new republic, Liang insisted people in China were trapped in a *bumin* (部民 tribesmen) mindset. Implicit in his argument was the view that Chinese people were unable to see themselves as belonging to a nation. For this reason, Liang's *xinmin* campaign targeted the general population, rather than the literati class who were well-versed in Confucianism. From this vantage point, Liang construes his basic assessment of China as lacking a collective consciousness beyond the clan. Yan Fu's major influence on Liang is his assessment of Chinese society as in urgent need of major transformation of "national characters" (国民性). Highlighting the difference in "social quality" between Chinese and western peoples, Yan proposed three dimensions of power that the Chinese needed to develop – *minli* (民力 physical power), *minzhi* (民智

intellectual power), and *minde* (民德 moral power). In particular, Yan emphasised *minde* as public spirits that require improving by curbing private interests in his essay *Yuanqiang* (原强 On the origins of national strength).

Drawing on Yan Fu's *minde* thesis as a key strand of his *xinmin* discourse, Liang discusses the idea of liberty in four categories – political, religious, national and economic. Of these four dimensions, Liang asserts that the political and the national, both of which he deems 'collective liberties,' are missing in China. The former refers to people's freedom from the government – freedom that can be gained by participating in politics. The latter refers to China's freedom from foreign powers that can be gained by establishing a nation-state. Critical of "individual liberty" (个人之自由), Liang denounces individual freedom as "savagery", and lauds collective freedom as "civilised":

> What we call freedom refers to the freedom of the collective, not freedom of the individual. In the age of savagery, individual freedom triumphs while collective freedom withers. In the age of civilization, collective freedom prevails, and individual freedom wanes. . . If we take freedom as individual freedom, it is none other than the Chinese who enjoy the most freedom in the world.'[2] (Liang 2013, 93-4).

Aversion to what he saw as excess of individual freedom in China motivated Liang to curb "self-centredness" – an undesirable quality to be eradicated in his national character rebuilding campaign. Liang sets out to define *xinmin* as being compliant to larger collective interests. Such compliance, he explains, means a careful observance to the rule of law as collective rules for the protection of all. For Liang, there is no such a thing as individual freedom because freedom is embodied in, and can only be expressed and achieved through, collective freedom. It is not difficult to see how this view echoed throughout modern Chinese socio-political discourses, including in the efforts against the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021. Reiterating collective freedom as a pre-requisite to nation-building, Liang gives a stark warning about the dangers of individual freedom:

> We should all appreciate that compliance is the mother of freedom. Alas! Young people today cannot stop talking about freedom. They think they are engaged with civilized ideas when making such noises. What they fail to see is what is meant by freedom in the west, like all other important ideas, has been conceived for the collective good. It is not meant for the individual to indulge in, hiding behind private

[2] The translation of Chinese texts to English in this article is mine.

> self-interest. . . I am scared of the word "freedom". It has become not only an excuse for dictatorship, but a public enemy of China's future' (Liang 2013, 94-5).

Such a radical view on liberty explains Liang's affinity for Bluntschli's political theories, whose tenets fit aptly into Liang's *xinmin*-building agenda. Appropriating liberty as an enlightenment value illustrates the instrumental nature of adapting western epistemology to China's domestic conditions. Yet, the skewed interpretation parallels Liang's equally slanted assessment of Chinese realities. For example, "liberty" is the third most frequently occurring concept noun in *Xinmin Shuo*, appearing 201 times. Ironically, the notion of liberty is predominantly conceptualised as explicating a laudable attribute of *xinmin* – supressing private desires for collective good. *Xinmin* as *volk* was discursively established as a collective body of people ready to come together as a nation.

Xinmin as *volk* lies at the heart of Liang's approach to nation-building. *Guomin* however functions as an intermediary yet important discursive model of *xinmin*. Consisting of *guo* 国 (state) and *min* 民 (people), *guomin* is meant to implicate people into the modern state – a vital identity transformation from tribal *bumin* to national *guomin*. Key to the transformation is raising the consciousness of a modern state Liang calls *guojia sixiang* (国家思想 state consciousness). In his article *Lun Guojia Sixiang* (On State Consciousness) in *Xinmin Shuo*, Liang defined *guomin* as those who had acquired *guojia sixiang*. The idea of state consciousness comprises of four main principles. First, private interests can best be served by tending to collective ones. Second, the royal court should be understood simply as an agency running the business for the state in the same way as a management works for a corporation. Third, all states in the world are engaged in a competition for the survival of the fittest. A state exists only for the protection of its people against other states. Fourth, the state is the ultimate and ideal form of an autonomous community. Competition among states is the mother of civilisation because interstate competition drives progress. Such *guojia sixiang*, Liang concludes, is missing in China due to the large political vacuum between family and *tianxia*. Like *volk* in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century German identity formation, *guomin* became central to the creation of a modern Chinese statehood. However, in contrast to coalescing smaller German speaking societies into a single German nation-state, China faced a different type of challenge - condensing the infinite Sino-centric *tianxia* to a finite Chinese state. Liang (2013, 19) underlines the imperative of becoming *guomin* in developing modern *xinmin* in a new nation state:

> China had *bumin*, not *guomin*. It is not because we were incapable of becoming *guomin*, but because we were shaped by historical circumstances. Our country used to stand tall in the East surrounded by minor barbarians, with no contact with other great powers. Our people regarded our country as the entire world. What we heard, what we thought, what the great and good taught us, and what we inherited from our ancestors make us a good individual in the family, in the village, in the clan, and in the *tianxia*, but not in a state as *guomin*. Countries now exist in a jungle world. If we do not become *guomin*, we stand no chance in the game that is the survival of the fittest.

Having pinpointed state consciousness as a key missing puzzle piece in China's path towards modernity, Liang tried to cultivate a sense of "nation people". Seeing the rising west and its "national imperialism" as an existential threat to China, Liang (2013, 10) nonetheless regards internationalist competition as a force for good: "since the sixteenth century, the rapid development of Europe and progress in the world are attributable to the power of nationalism". Forced into such a competition, China had no choice but to accept social Darwinism as an implicit rule for survival in the new international order. The first step in this process was to build a nation-state by creating public-minded *guomin*. However, China was met with a core dilemma in that the notion of *guo* (state) had long lost its political denotation as a form of state. *Guo* existed in pre-Qin China (before 221BC) under a centralised but weak feudal institution of *tianzi,* or the Son of Heaven. With Qin unification (259-210BC), *guo* under the emperor gradually dissolved into the imperial court representing a universal *tianxia* order. In post-Qin China, family and *tianxia* were situated at each end of identity spectrum. Family as the indivisible core constituted the model upon which larger socio-political entities are conceptualised and established. *Tianxia* as the universal cultural entity is governed by a similar set of values such as *ci* 慈 (kindness), *xia* 孝 (filial piety) and *shan* 善 (goodness). Applying a European model to describe Chinese moral characters, Liang nonetheless favoured traditional power relations conducive to maintaining state authority. Inheriting the state-as-family discursive metaphor, Liang moralised the role of the state:

> A group to an individual is what a state is to *guomin* – the benevolence of the state is the same as the family. . . Thus, obligations to the group and state are what a good individual should discharge. Those who forsake their obligations are enemy to the group and state whether they are good or bad individuals in their private morality' (2013, 36).

Such a view explains his support for an "enlightened absolutism" (*kaiming zhuanzhi* 开明专制) in maintaining centralised power while circumventing popularism. In his grand framework, the value of the individual lies in its function as a building block of *qun* (discussed below) that is then aggregated into a nation-state. The individual is understood in a narrow, mechanical, and utilitarian fashion. Building a nation-state in the image of Europe, Liang became captivated with the European public-minded individuals he was eager to replicate in China. Rather than enhancing individual liberty by shifting loyalty away from the family, Liang resubmitted the individual to the power of state. In essence, Liang sought and to some degree succeeded in transforming the traditional subject-emperor relationship to a new *guomin*-state relationship.

Qun as a discursive building block of xinmin

A key concept in the discursive formation of *xinmin* is the notion of *qun* (群 grouping). As a newly risen term in late Qing, *qun* refers to social grouping beyond a clan-based, face-to-face community. Deploying it as a discursive instrument for nation-building, Liang advanced the argument that hundreds of thousands of local communities across China must be coalesced into a single Chinese 'nation'. As an attempt to displace traditional notions of society, the concept of *qun* sought to develop a political bond among countless compatriots to replace organic local relationships. In classical Chinese, *qun* (群) refers to the grouping of similar species, such as a flock of sheep. The character *qun* consists of 羊 and 君. 羊 as a semantic radical means "sheep"; 君 as a phonetic radical indicates the pronunciation of the character. The connotation of *qun* was later expanded to include a congregation of people with a similar background. Xunzi (荀子 316-215BC) provides the best explanation of *qun* as distinctive human ability to live in a group in contrast to animals:

> Man's strength is not equal to that of the ox, and his ability to run is not equal to that of the horse, yet the ox and horse are used by him. Why is this? I say it is because men are able to live in a *qun*, whereas the others are not. How is it that men are able to live in a *qun*? I say it is because of their social distinctions. How is that the social distinctions can be carried out? I say it is because of the ethical obligations. Hence if men are to exist, they cannot live without *qun* (Xunzi 1988).

After China's defeat in 1895 at the end of the First Sino-Japanese War, the semantics of *qun* underwent a significant change. Yan Fu uses *qun* to render "society" in his translation of Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* published in 1893, and Herbert Spencer's *The Study*

of Sociology in 1903. As an eminent scholar, Yan uses *qun* as a novel concept to discuss the structure of social organisations. He underscores the importance of *qun* as a collective human life in his 1895 article *Yuanqiang* (原强 the origin of power)[3]:

> *Qun* is a form of a social grouping. If you fail to understand the individual, you fail to appreciate the totality of *qun*. The formation, stability, nature and functions of *qun* are similar to those of an organism despite their differences in size' (Yan 1986, 11).

Huxley's concept of an organic society resonates prominently in Yan's articulation of *qun* in restructuring late Qing society. Building on Yan, Liang elaborates on *qun* as a key indicator of the quality and mode of social governance. In an 1897 article titled *Shuo Qun* (说群 Explaining *Qun*) published in *Shiwu Bao*, Liang argues that the world would maintain perpetual order if *qun* could be established as its foundation. As such, Liang was able to transcend the boundary of social relationships between traditional face-to-face community and the larger political "imagined community" of strangers as a nation. *Qun* is thus imbued with moral qualities in political relationships.

Meanwhile, *du* (独 being alone, separation), the opposite to *qun*, is construed as an anti-social selfish behaviour that disrupts the cohesion of *qun*. *Du* is portrayed as leading to an inferior community and poorer governance. In the preface to *Qun Shuo*, Liang (1984, 10) elaborates the differences between *qun* and *du*:

> To govern a society with guidance of *qun*, a *qun* arises; to govern it with *du*, *qun* collapses. One *qun's* collapse is another *qun's* gain. What would happen when *du* prevails? Everyone cares about himself, not *tianxia*. A ruler cares about his reigning house. An official about his position. A farmer about his land. An artisan about his trade. A merchant about his price. A man about his private interests. A family about its possessions. A tribe about its clan. A clan about its families. A village about its farming fields. A faction about its secrets. A teacher about his teaching, and a pupil about his learning. Thus, four hundred million[4] people become four hundred million countries. That is no country at all. Those skilled in governance know both the ruler and people are members of a *qun*. They understand how a *qun* functions and prospers. They facilitate *qun* to cohere rather than fracture, to thrive rather than crumple. This is the art of *qun*. This is how one country distinguishes from another. In a disorderly world, *du* tramples over *qun*. In a peaceful world; *qun* thrives under the guidance of *qun*.

[3] The text Yuanqiang was first published in the newspaper *Zhibao* (直报) in Tianjin in March 1895.

[4] China's population is about four hundred million around the turn into the twentieth century. Here it refers to China.

Seen as an essential requirement of *xinmin*, *qun* consciousness is portrayed as a desirable moral quality that calls on individuals to cede their rights, discharge their obligations, and confer their loyalty to the abstraction of the nation. Nation-state building thus became a political exercise of raising *qun* consciousness through three discursive acts - *liqun* (利群 lit. benefit *qun*), *aiqun* (爱群 lit. love *qun*) and *aiguo* (爱国 lit. love the country). In this sense, *xinmin* was conceived as moral revolution of *daode gemin* (道德革命) aiming at a comprehensive reform of national moral life. To combat moral defects as a fatal flaw, Liang appealed to the public to develop *gongde* (公德 public moralities) as an urgent remedy:

> What is most conspicuously lacking in our people is *gongde*. What is *gongde*? It is what makes people a *qun*[5], and a country a country. Humans are *qun* animals (so said the western philosopher Aristotle). If humans do not form a *qun*, how are they any different from animals? However, you cannot simply shout to people '*qun* yourselves, *qun* yourselves', and expect *qun* to arise. There must be something that binds everyone to a *qun*. What binds people is *gongde* (Liang 2013, 33).

Having established the function of *gongde* in the formation of *qun*, Liang contrasts *gongde* to *side* (私德 private morality). *Gongde* is positive in improving the collective *qun*, but *side* exists only to benefit the private self. Though both are essential, self-perfecting individuals fixated on personal advancement will never come together as an effective nation. By establishing the discursive linkage between *qun* and *gongde*, Liang was able to imagine a new social structure, facilitating the political construction of nationhood. As an ideal modern people, *xinmin* is enumerated in the discourse of *qun*-building through a reconstructing of the moral fabric of Chinese society. Liang concludes that the vast majority of traditional moralities are concerned with *side*, hence the abysmal lack of *qun* consciousness. Against *taixi xin lunli* (泰西新伦理 western new moralities), Liang reassessed China's *jiu lunli* (旧伦理 old morality) centred around five relationships - father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, emperor-minister and friend-friend. Out of these, three are family relationships, and two are social; but all are private relationships guided by private moralities, serving private rather than collective interests. Liang (2013, 33) concluded therefore "without *gongde* people cannot cohere into a large grouping. Despite innumerable well-disciplined, well-mannered and good-hearted people, they cannot form a state". China's decline in the late Qing period is thus attributed to the millions of self-improving individuals who

[5] Qun is a highly versatile character that used both as a noun, a verb and an adjective.

relinquished their personal aspirations to those of the *qun*. The size of China's large population became a liability precisely because size does not inherently necessitate the cohesion of *qun*, and in many cases works against it.

With its cohesive abilities, *gongde* is highlighted as the foundation behind the strength of European nations – it is their superior *gongde* that enables them to rise above other nations and dominate the Darwinian world. With this mirror image of China in hand, Liang saw a dystopian China he was determined to change. Applying social scientific principles, Liang established the discursive authority and legitimacy of *qun* and *gongde*, albeit in a utilitarian fashion. Before detailing the sixteen social ills in China, Liang provides an overall assessment. Firstly, China focused on private relationships between individuals, in contrast to western relationships which centred around the individual and a wider social group. Secondly, it was only family ethics that existed China, while the West had social and state ethics in addition to family ethics. All twenty articles[6] in *Xinmin Shuo* follow a similar pattern – lamenting the deficiencies of Chinese moral characters against western models. All types of moralities are redefined to fit into Liang's *xinmin*-building agenda, with key terms being reinterpreted to align with a new imagined social structure. For instance, "rights" are presented as "obligation of a private person not only to himself but to a group" (Liang 2013, 78). Though Confucian morality emphasizes obligations, rather than rights in human relationships, Liang nonetheless noted in China the absence of peoples' obligations to the collective. Similarly, in criticising the traditional lack of duties to the state, Liang contrasts the selfishness of the Chinese people to the altruism of the Europeans. Commending Europeans as the demographic most capable of self-governance, Liang views China as anarchic for its lack of individual governance skills. Locating traditional moral deficiency in five malaises – absence of competition, limited external contact, separation between written and spoken languages, autocratic regime, and narrow-mindedness - Liang deemed the Chinese polity as trapped in a time warp. The bleak assessment echoes Hegel's view of Chinese history as being embalmed in an eternal changelessness. *Xinmin Shuo* thus becomes a catalogue of indictments against Chinese moral characters. It is unsurprising therefore that

[6] The twenty article titles are translated as follows: (1) Introduction; (2) On renewing the people as China's most urgent matter today; (3) Explicating the meaning of new citizen; (4) On the suitability of following the examples of others by using the superiority and inferiority of nations as proof of the results of renewing the people; (5) On public morality; (6) On nationalism; (7) On aggressiveness and adventurism; (8) On the idea of rights; (9) On freedom; (10) On self-government; (11) On progress (or why group rule fails to make any progress in China); (12) On self-respect; (13) On getting along well with others; (14) On generating profit and taking a share of profit; (15) On will power; (16) On the idea of obligation; (17) On the importance of military affairs; (18) On private morality; (19) On people's morale; (20) On political ability.

the most frequently recurring verb in *Xinmin Shuo* is *pohuai* (破坏 destruction). In the essay *On progress or why China cannot improve its qun governance*, the term *pohuai* occurred 117 times. Destroying the extant system was portrayed as the most effective approach to progress: "I have sought lessons from those who made progress in all countries and times. I wanted to find a universal and inescapable truth. I will not embellish my language but to be frank to my compatriots - the lesson is to destroy" (Liang 2013, 120). By highlighting China's dearth of public morality, Liang paved the way for developing *xinmin* moralities in the image of the West.

However, the private-public dichotomy is nevertheless an artificial one, construed for an imagined *qun* as a community of strangers. In traditional Chinese philosophy, 'the public' refers to a face-to-face community where social conduct is regulated by social norms. *Gong* and *si* are complementary to each other, both seen as essential moralities, rather than a binary dichotomy. *Gong* was in fact the favoured value promoted in Confucian classics. The cultural ideal of *tianxia weigong* (天下为公 all for the public) is recorded in *liji* (Conveyance of Rites) in Western Han Dynasty (BC206-23). Following Yan Fu however, Liang went on to dichotomise the two concepts, assigning *si* to China and *gong* to the west. *Si* as private morality is accorded with negative undertones. This instrumentalist view of morality not only misrepresents Confucian moral principles but leads to moral relativism. Liang values public morality in terms of its serviceability to group interests. Group interests however vary temporally and spatially. Should standards of public morality change to suit the evolving needs of the group? His answer appears to be in the affirmation from illustrations he draws from anthropological accounts. Primitive tribes regard women as public possession. Some see no moral offence in keeping slaves if group interests dictate it. Rationalised by evolutionary behaviours, moral relativism reflects social Darwinism prevalent at the time, and the elites' angst for China's dire situation and urgent need for change. Liang's radical view on public morality was instrumental to his campaign of social engineering - altering people's pattern of behaviours to build a large political community as a nation. In a binary portrayal, Liang (2013, 37) moralises *qun* as a political construct: "benefiting *qun* is good; not benefiting *qun* is evil. Harmful to *qun* is a greater evil; not beneficial but unharmful to *qun* is a lesser evil." The civic virtues of *qun* are thus worthy so far as they are serviceable to the state.

Significance of xinmin discourse

Nation-building is primarily centred around developing a sense of membership in a political community bonded by cultural heritage. The relationship between a people and their nation is at the heart of nation-building. Key to the *xinmin* discourse is the promotion of such a relationship through people-making, a process that was absent in the revolutionary republicanism led by Sun Yat-sen. The *xinmin* campaign thus constitutes a social revolution complementary to Sun Yat-sen's political revolution. However, unlike European nation-building grounded in a belief in history as the primary currency for a nation's cultural repertoire, *xinmin*-building has been driven by a rejection of moral heritage. Dystopianising the past becomes another anomaly in nation-building in the crusadist discourse of *xinmin*. As Renan (2018, 261) emphasized in his famous 1882 treatise *What is a Nation?*, a nation must be in possession of "a rich legacy of memories" and to have the will to "perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form". Renan (2018, 261) compares the nation to the individual in drawing strength from history as "the culmination of a long past of efforts, sacrifices, and devotion. The cult of ancestors is the most legitimate of all; our ancestors have made us who we are". The foundation of nation-building, as Renan and other modern scholars (Hobsbawm 1990, Gellner 2006, Anderson 2006, Smith 2008) on nationalism argue, is establishing a shared link with the past. Rather than creating continuities, the *xinmin* discourse cleaved away the past by establishing *xin* (新 new), not only in a "new people" but a new literature, new culture, new education and new learning in instigating sweeping changes. The mechanical nature of the campaign is ascribed to external values misaligned with Chinese conditions. What is significant is not only the intentional distortion of traditional moralities, but the decontextualization of Chinese society that had previously given rise to an agrarian mode of existence. Social customs have been organically shaped by their surrounding physical and social environments. Social institutions have evolved from established social customs, and social values have evolved from social institutions.

Unlike European nations growing largely out of organic changes since the Middle Ages, the idea of nation was imposed by Chinese elites as a deliberate means of national salvation (Cao 2021). The process of endogenizing external (European) values, institutions, and practices has played a critical role in this instrumental nationalism, which sought to mobilise nationalist sentiment by appealing to the subjective aspects of the nation articulated by Anderson (2006). Removing domestic socio-historical conditions is part of the social engineering process of nation-building where the end justifies the means. It is different from

the primordialist mode of nationalism that draws upon the historical and cultural roots of a nation as its quasi-objective character. Yet, as a social engineering project embedded in a foreign ideology, the *xinmin* discourse nonetheless retains strategic continuities. Rather than developing a modern citizenry as autonomous right-bearers, *xinmin* cultivates a sense of allegiance to the nation-state. The novel civic ethos of *qun* was not meant to benefit the local communities that the Chinese communal self had long been customed to, but conducive to the formation of a single political community over a vast territory. By shifting popular allegiance away from the family, the *xinmin* campaign succeeded in projecting the state as a new social unit, embodying the new 'nation'. Thus, the *xinmin* rhetoric reveals a covert affinity to traditional power structures, as epitomised by Liang's (2013, 36) use of the state-as-family metaphor in defining the state-*guomin* relationship:

> A group to a person is the state to *guomin* – the benevolence the state bestows is the same as the family. . . Thus, obligations to the group and state is what a committed individual should discharge. Anyone forsaking his obligation is the enemy to the group and state whether he is a good or bad person in private moralities.

Thus, Liang promoted an instrumentalist notion of *xinmin* as a subjective position, different from a European citizenry and traditional imperial subjects. By attributing China's decline to the Chinese obsession with private moralities, Liang explicitly championed a centralised mode of governance over individual autonomy, with the central leadership representing the modern nation-state.. The top-down elitist demand for *xinmin* allegiance overrode the bottom-up focus on citizen rights, which Liang was fully aware of but considered it to be not only of secondary importance, but even potentially dangerous to establishing the power of the nation-state.

In shifting China from a cultural entity to a political identity, the *xinmin* discourse played a significant role in replacing Confucianism with nationalism. The internal tensions within this mode of nation-building continue to manifest themselves in contemporary China, including the strain between the institutional structure of the nation-state and the universalist *tianxia* mode of thinking that characterises Chinese discourse on global issues. Nonetheless, the Chinese nation, as coined by Liang Qichao in 1901, emerged powerfully as the basis for state building throughout the twentieth century. The *xinmin* discourse that inspired a generation of Chinese intellectual elites including Hu Shi, Lu Xun and Mao Zedong, gradually merged with the concept of *guomin* that shaped the nationalist revolution led by the

Kuomintang until 1949. The rise and fall of *xinmin* discourse in the first decade of the twentieth century as the inaugural phase of nation-building bears key features of Chinese nationalism. They include tensions between a universalist civilisation and a particularistic nation, cultural heritage and imported ideologies, and a primordialist and instrumentalist understanding of the Chinese nation. As an artificial construct serving a political purpose, the nation and process of nation-building is a continuous one, with its future configurations contingent upon evolving circumstances.

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