

## **Social Darwinism and Religion: The Cross-Cultural Experiences of Liang Qichao and Nitobe Inazo**

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### **Introduction**

In recent years, a growing number of scholars have begun to consider the importance of religion in modern Chinese history. This academic trend is a reflection of the revival of religion that has occurred in China since the 1980s alongside China's reform policy of opening up the country to the outside world. Almost all scholars stress the constructed nature of the category of "religion" and refer to the role that educated elites have played in shaping this term. For example, Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang (2008) argues that the educated elites in modern China have rejected religion and created the myth that the Chinese have been fundamentally secular and pragmatist throughout their history. She also points out that Western missionaries, modern science, and social evolutionism—otherwise known as social Darwinism—influenced this rejection of religion among the educated elites. I think, however, that this is only one aspect of the influence of social Darwinism. The educated elites not only rejected religion but also utilized religion to construct modern nations from a social Darwinist viewpoint.

It seems reasonable to suppose that social Darwinism was the first idea to become globalized in the process of modernization. Social Darwinism is named after Charles Darwin, but the idea actually originated with Herbert Spencer. Herbert Spencer was an English philosopher, liberal political theorist, as well as sociological theorist of the Victorian era, who is known for coining the term "survival of the fittest." Spencer applied the concept of evolution to the realms of sociology, ethics, and religion. Nowadays, scholars do not pay much attention to Spencer's work, but during the last few decades of the nineteenth century, Spencer and his ideas achieved exceptional popularity. His work influenced a broad range of fields and spread all over the world. Japan and China, where Spencer's work and vulgar Spencerism appeared in local translations, were no exception.<sup>1</sup>

By social Darwinism, I mean not only the thought of Spencer himself but also popularized views of it, which were inspired by Spencer's works and assumed that the world is ruled by the law of the survival of the fittest.<sup>2</sup> The term "social Darwinism" is ambiguous as Bannister describes (1979: 3-13), but I agree with Hawkins (1997: 32) in treating social Darwinism as a

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<sup>1</sup> See Onogawa ([1960] 2010: 51-107) for the introduction of Darwinism to late imperial China; for a comprehensive study of the impact of Darwinism on modern China, see Pusey (1983). For the influence of Spencer's thought on Meiji-era Japan, see Yamashita (1983).

<sup>2</sup> For the variety of the use of the term "social Darwinism," see Bannister (1979: 3-13).

worldview to define its discursive role.

In this paper, I would like to demonstrate how social Darwinism affected Chinese and Japanese thought around the turn of the twentieth century by comparing the cross-cultural experiences of two thinkers.

One of the thinkers I want to examine is Liang Qichao (梁启超, 1873-1929), an eminent scholar, journalist, and politician in late imperial and early republican China. He traveled to the United States in 1903 and recorded his experiences there in an essay entitled "Travel to the New World" (Liang [1904a] 1989) in 1904.

There is a vast body of scholarship on Liang's thought, and it is well known that Liang was a social Darwinist. The Japanese scholar Shinichi Sato (1996) in particular has comprehensively studied the process of Liang's absorption of social Darwinism. Concerning Liang's religious thought, Marianne Bastid-Burguière (1998) has provided a chronological analysis, and Noriko Mori (1999) has pointed out the influence of Japanese religious thought on Liang's works. These studies on Liang's social Darwinist viewpoint and his ideas on religion and ethics, however, have paid little attention to Liang's essay "Travel to the New World." Therefore, one of my aims in this paper is to reveal the interaction between Liang's social Darwinist views and his understanding of religion and ethics by analyzing "Travel to the New World"

The second thinker I examine is Nitobe Inazao (新渡戸稲造, 1862-1933). Nitobe was one of the first intellectuals to convert to Christianity in the Meiji era, and is well known as the author of the book *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, one of the most influential books written by a Japanese in English (Nitobe [1899] 1999-2001). In his youth, he studied in the United States, and *Bushido* was written and published during his stay there in 1899, four years before Liang's trip. Nitobe is well known as an educator and internationalist. However, few know that he was the first lecturer on colonial policy in Japan, and his lectures on the subject reflected a social Darwinist viewpoint. In this paper, I offer an analysis of *Bushido* and Nitobe's lectures and works on colonial policy. Nitobe's thinking on colonial policy was based on his experiences in Taiwan and Korea, which provided him with another cross-cultural experience.

## **Liang Qichao**

In 1898, Liang participated in a failed reform movement in China and was exiled to Japan as a result. He stayed for the next fourteen years in Japan and absorbed Western knowledge through Japanese translations of Western works. During his time in Japan, he gave a lecture at a conference on philosophy held in Tokyo in 1899. In this lecture, entitled "On the Chinese Religious Reformation" (论支那宗教改革) (Liang [1899] 1989), he used the term *zongjiao* (宗教), which had come into usage as the Japanese translation of the term "religion." This marked one of the first cases where a Chinese used the word "zongjiao" to denote the concept of religion.

In 1903, Liang embarked on an eight-month lecture tour through the United States and published a record of this trip in the following year. In the United States, he did not see the assimilation of the various ethnicities into American society or peaceful, generous coexistence but

rather, competition among the various ethnic groups and the division of society into superior and inferior groups. Liang wrote that he did not worry about Americans except for one thing. This one thing he worried about was immigrants. He wrote, "A great number of inferior people from Europe and other places come to the United States and become American citizens" (Liang [1904a] 1989: 28). Based on statistics, he pointed out that the total number of immigrants to the United States had been more than 10 million over the course of a quarter of a century. The number reached a seventh of the whole population of the United States, and this trend was still continuing at the time. Italians and Austro-Hungarians were the most voluminous groups among these immigrants. In 1902 alone, more than 170,000 people arrived in the country. In 1903, 200,000 people or more immigrated. Italians and Austro-Hungarians made up half of all these immigrants. The next-largest groups of immigrants were Russians and people from other East European nations (Liang [1904a] 1989: 28-32).

Liang used these statistics to emphasize that the number of "Teutons" (条顿) in the United States was quite small. He used the term Teutons to refer to Anglo-Americans. Liang assumed that the Anglo-Saxons or Anglo-Americans were superior to other ethnicities. Thus, he worried that the increase in immigrants would turn the Teutons into a minority. He thought that if this happened, it would be terrible for the United States (Liang [1904a] 1989: 32). Liang understood the world as a space in which every nation strives for survival in competition with other nations. In Liang's view, American society itself already constituted such a space of competition domestically, since the country incorporated many ethnic groups in competition with each other, while also simultaneously competing with other countries internationally. In this sense, the society of the United States was a miniature version of the world.

### **Chinatown**

During his travels, Liang often visited Chinatowns and compared them with the other communities that he saw in the country. He came to the conclusion that the power of assimilation of the United States was weak, as not only the Chinese but also the other ethnicities had created their own, separate communities. For example, Italian, Jewish, and Russian communities had been established. He argued that although it was his first time in the United States, he could clearly see the existence of these distinct communities.

At the time Liang traveled to the United States, Chinatowns were notorious for their dirtiness. For example, the Japanese novelist Kafu Nagai (永井荷風), who stayed in the United States around the same time as Liang, described in his *American Stories* (Nagai [1908] 1952) that a Chinatown was a place exhibiting man's moral corruption, vice, uncleanness, illness, and death. In addition, he reported that Americans considered Chinese people to be mere animals and not even an inferior race of humans (Nagai [1908] 1952: 299-309).

Liang opposed such views, and argued that the Chinese people are actually superior to those of other nations. Liang assumed that it was only the popularity of the idea of the Yellow Peril that caused others to perceive the Chinese people in such a negative light (Liang [1904a] 1989: 39).

According to his observations, in the settlements inhabited by Italians and Jews, sunlight does not reach all dwellings. These houses were filled with a horrible stench. Liang catalogued the dirtiness and poverty of these towns.

### **Disappointment in the Chinese**

However, throughout his trip Liang also expressed his disappointment in the Chinese and gave some examples of the inferiority of Chinese people. For instance, Liang argued that if one hundred or more Chinese were assembled in one hall, even if they were ordered not to make any noise, four kinds of sound would surely be heard. The most common sound would be coughing. Next would be yawning and sneezing. And many people would also be heard blowing their noses. Liang himself had experienced this once during a speech, where these sounds could be heard incessantly. On the other hand, visiting a European meeting hall or theater, no sound could be heard even if there were thousands of people present (Liang [1904a] 1989: 125).

Next, Liang gave a number of examples of behavior on trains. He said that Chinese trains were always equipped with spittoons and one would constantly see some ill-mannered person spitting into them. On the other hand, spittoons could not be found on American trains. Liang mentioned that when he traveled by train in China for more than three hours, more than half of the passengers were sleeping. Even when riding on an American train all day long, nobody fell into a deep sleep. He concluded from these examples that it was clear which one was the superior nation of the two (Liang [1904a] 1989: 125).

In addition, having attended dozens of meetings at Chinese meeting halls overseas, Liang gave an example of the lack of political capability of the Chinese people. Liang found that the meetings were either one of two forms, both of which he saw as problematic based on the observations he had made in the United States. The first form of meeting was one in which the listeners obediently follow what one or two influential persons from the upper class say. These so-called meetings were in actual fact only occasions for leaders to make declarations and give orders. Liang called this an "oligarchic tyranny" (寡人专制政体). The other kind of meeting was one in which there is no member of the upper class or person of great influence present. In this case, whenever an argument starts, the surrounding hooligans make a lot of noise and nothing can be decided on as a result. Liang called this a "tyranny of hooligans" (暴民专政政体) (Liang [1904a] 1989: 123).

### **Liang's Evaluation of the Chinese People**

Based on his observations in the United States, Liang judged the cultural characteristics of the Chinese people (Liang [1904a] 1989: 104-5, 121-5).

As positive characteristics of the Chinese people, he mentioned their strong love of their hometowns, making them patriotic by nature. Neither do they easily assimilate foreign ways. This indicates that they have a sense of nationalism, independence, and self-respect, which is vital for

the founding of a state. Furthermore, Chinese people have great chivalry and can bear great hardship. They are an industrious, economical people, and they are trustworthy. These three characteristics are needed in order to compete in the economic world.

In regard to the negative characteristics of the Chinese, Liang pointed out that Chinese people are too busy with their work to have lofty aims in life. They are certainly industrious, but are caught up in their own survival and acquisition of wealth. They cannot afford to consider how to benefit the Chinese community as a whole. Thus, Liang judged that they lacked political capability. They are fundamentally a tribal people and not citizens of a modern nation-state. They think about their village, but do not think about their nation. Liang argued that Chinese society was based on the family, not the individual. Since the Zhou Dynasty, Chinese society had been organized based on the idea that "a state is governed well after a house is ruled well." Liang thought that while this system had fallen from use, the spirit of this form of societal organization still remained.

### **Enlightened Despotism**

Based on these observations, Liang's anxiety that Chinese people could only be governed through despotism and were unable to enjoy freedom was strengthened. After returning to Japan, he began to publish essays reflecting this standpoint. He decided that coercion was necessary for the existence of a society. Society without coercion would be ruined. According to Liang, coercion is thus sacred for a society.

It was with this logic that Liang justified despotism. He divided despotism into two types (Liang [1906] 1989). One was "barbarous despotism" (野蛮专制), which mainly profits the despot, the subject of a despotic regime. The other kind was "enlightened despotism" (启蒙专制), which mostly profits the people who are the object of despotism. Liang acknowledged that barbarous despotism was out of the question. His experiences in the United States made Liang impatient for the creation of a strong China and Chinese people. He keenly realized the necessity of firm leadership for the construction of a strong state in China. Thus, he called for enlightened despotism and asserted that it was what the Chinese people needed.

Contrary to this standpoint, Liang had formerly insisted that reforming China should not be done in a top-down manner. He urged that it was necessary to reform individuals at the grass-roots level for the reconstruction of China. He called these reformed individuals "new people" (新民).

### **Coherence as a Social Darwinist**

In his embracing of despotism, Liang has been accused of abandoning democracy. Indeed, Liang tended to change his views at short intervals. However, I think that we can see that his adherence to social Darwinist ideas was continuous. Based on a social Darwinist perspective, Liang assumed that international relations are a fierce struggle for survival among various nations, and a society or a nation must be sufficiently strong to win this battle for existence. In order to be

strong, people must form a homogenous body politic. Liang argued for the necessity of a "new religion" to create social cohesion in Chinese society when he started his exile in Japan. And he expected Buddhism to take on the role of this new religion, which edifies the Chinese people and results in social integration. Liang understood religions to be bearing common values that integrate individuals into society. Liang thought it to be essential for the formation of an integrated society that all members of the community share an affiliation to the same religion. Liang considered religion to provide the common values that ought to be shared by all members of a nation.

Similar to his ideas on politics, Liang's perception of religion underwent various transformations during his lifetime. However, his social Darwinist perspective did not change. His ideas concerning what edifies people and integrates them into a nation changed, but his conviction that people need something to edify and integrate them did not. When he proposed the concept of the "new people," his idea was obviously centered not on the individual but on the nation. He assumed that competition was the mother of civilization. He thought that families are formed out of competition among individuals, that several families form a village, and that many villages further form a nation (Liang [1902] 1989: 18). For him, the history of human beings was the history of the development from family to state.

Liang held that the world is an arena in which individuals, families, tribes, and nations compete with one another and that a nation is the highest form of organization, which represents the pinnacle of this system of competition. Liang's way of thinking did not juxtapose individual and state as mutually exclusive entities, but held that since the state exists, an individual can exist. Liang thought that it was necessary to imbue the people with a sense of nationalism in order to accomplish reform of society, unification of the country, and establishment of social order.

From this point of view, the "new religion," Buddhism, the "new people," and enlightened despotism serve the same function. All of these elements are expected to edify individuals and integrate them into a strong nation. His experiences in the United States accelerated Liang's impatience for a strong China and a strong Chinese people, leading him to propose the idea of enlightened tyranny. However, the driving force behind his argument—social Darwinism—did not change.

In 1904, Liang wrote an essay entitled "China's Bushido" or "China's Way of the Warrior" (中国之武士道) (Liang [1904b] 1989). It is possible that Liang was familiar with and inspired by Nitobe Inazo's book *Bushido*. *Bushido* was published a few years before Liang's travels to the United States and we can find a number of similarities between Liang Qichao and Nitobe Inazo.

### **Nitobe Inazo**

Nitobe was born in Morioka in 1862 as the son of a samurai. He graduated from Sapporo Agricultural College, present-day Hokkaido University, in 1881. From 1884, he studied at universities in the United States. After a three-year stay in the United States, he studied in Germany, and then came back to Japan to teach at Sapporo Agricultural College. However, he became overworked and fell sick. In 1898, he went to the United States for medical treatment and

stayed there until 1900. His well-known book *Bushido* was written, or more properly, dictated, at this time.

In general, Nitobe is seen as a moralist and internationalist. This image is largely founded on his career as an educator and as under-secretary general of the League of Nations from 1919 to 1926. It is said that his education at the First High School (一高 Ichiko) and his character came to form the foundation of elite culture (教養 *kyōyō*) in Japan (Takeuchi 2003: 39).

However, it is less well known that he was also the first university lecturer in colonial policy in Japan. After publishing his famous book *Bushido* in the United States, he accepted a post in the Japanese colonial administration in Taiwan. Indeed, his experiences in Taiwan are regarded as forming the basis of his lectures on colonial policy.

Therefore, it can be said that Nitobe had two different faces, that of the moralist and that of the colonialist. However, below this superficial difference, the different aspects of Nitobe's thought rested on a common fundament of social Darwinist thought. There is a good deal of discussion regarding Nitobe's ideas concerning colonial policy, but few have focused on the influence of social Darwinism on his ideas.

Most studies tend to treat Nitobe as a believer in moralism, and focus on his humanitarianism and Christian beliefs. For example, Kyoji Asada (1988) states that Nitobe was not a simple imperialist, and emphasizes that Nitobe consistently advocated a humanitarian approach. Masahiro Sato (1985) analyzes Nitobe's thought on colonial policy from the viewpoint of Nitobe's Christian beliefs, and concludes that Nitobe's colonial policy reflected not the idea of expansion of states but the biblical ideal of human concord. Yuko Morikami (2007) has focused on Nitobe's adherence to Quaker beliefs. Quakers insist on the equality of human beings and believe in the existence of an "Inner Light" in individual hearts. Morikami concludes that Nitobe's ideal of colonial policy was based on this concept of the "Inner Light." These studies have the tendency to treat Nitobe as a moralist to a greater or lesser extent.

On the other hand, Rui Kohiyama (2009) stresses that Nitobe coherently adhered to imperialism and Kimitada Miwa (1995) analyzes the influence of traditional colonial thought in Japan on Nitobe's colonial policy. Shinichi Kitaoka (1993) has pointed out the contradiction between Nitobe's internationalist and colonialist sides. Although Nitobe's imperialist inclinations have been an object of study for a long time, there is little attention paid to the influence of social Darwinism on Nitobe's thought. Thus, I would like to focus on Nitobe's imperialistic views and show how he coherently employed social Darwinist ideas in his thinking.

### ***Bushido***

In *Bushido*, similar to Liang, Nitobe assumed that individual cultivation or the civilizing process is needed to strengthen a nation. He also believed that a religion or a code of ethics is necessary in order to civilize individuals.

A famous anecdote recounted in the first pages of the book shows Nitobe's understanding of religions (Nitobe [1899] 1999-2001: 7). On one occasion, a Belgian jurist asked him about

religious instruction in Japanese schools. He replied that there was no religious education in Japanese schools. The Belgian jurist was astonished and asked again how morality is taught without religion. Nitobe was puzzled and could not answer. *Bushido* was written as a reply to this question many years later. Nitobe's answer was that *bushido* played the role of religion in Japan and gave the Japanese a sense of right and wrong.

Rui Kohiyama (2009: 137-40) points out that Nitobe understood *bushido* through the lens of his Christian beliefs. In *Bushido*, Nitobe wrote, "I believe in the religion taught by Him [Christ] and handed down to us in the New Testament, as well as in the law written in the heart. Further, I believe that God hath made a testament which maybe called 'old' with every people and nation—Gentile or Jew, Christian or Heathen" (Nitobe [1899] 1999-2001: 8). In Japan, the samurai were for Nitobe those who tried to put into action this "old" testament. In fact, Nitobe compared *bushido* to the prophets. "Like His [Christ's] Hebrew precursors, the prophets—notably Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Habakkuk—Bushido laid particular stress on the moral conduct of rulers and public men and of nations" (Nitobe [1899] 1999-2001: 140).

The samurai constituted only a small part of Japanese society, of course. In the section "The Influence of Bushido" (Nitobe [1899] 1999-2001: 120-5), Nitobe acknowledged that the virtues of the samurai were far superior to those of the ordinary people. Nitobe thought, however, that *bushido* had the power to spread morality. Nitobe said that as the rising sun shines at the highest peak of a mountain first and then gradually lights the valleys below, so the ethical system would first enlighten the samurai class and would then also attract followers from among the masses.

In the same section, we can find Nitobe's social Darwinist views. Nitobe quoted the words of William Hurrell Mallock who was the author of a book entitled *Aristocracy and Evolution* (Mallock 1898). Mallock said that historical progress is generally produced through the struggle not of a whole community to live, but the struggle amongst a small section of the community to lead, to direct, and to employ the majority in the best way (Nitobe [1899] 1999-2001: 122). Nitobe refrained from deciding whether this aristocratic statement was justified or not. However, Nitobe acknowledged that the samurai corresponded to the "small section of the community" Mallock mentioned in his work, and that they led the majority "in the best way." Thus, for Nitobe, the samurai "were not only the flower of the nation, but its root as well. All the gracious gifts of Heaven flowed through them. Though they kept themselves socially aloof from the populace, they set a moral standard for them and guided them by their example" (Nitobe [1899] 1999-2001: 121).

### **Nitobe as a Spiritual Colonialist**

Nitobe's social Darwinist and colonialist inclinations are most clearly represented in his thinking on colonial policy. However, Nitobe was not a simple colonialist but rather, a "spiritual" colonialist.

In 1899, when Nitobe was staying in the United States and writing *Bushido*, he was invited to become an officer in the Japanese colonial administration in Taiwan. He rejected the offer at first, but he eventually accepted and went to Taiwan in 1901. Still, during his stay, he left Taiwan



frequently. His stay in Taiwan only extended to one and a half years. In 1903, he left Taiwan to be a professor at Kyoto University. He used his experiences in the colonial administration for his lectures on colonial policy.

In transcripts of his lectures collected by his students in later years (Nitobe [1943] 1999-2001), Nitobe emphasized the idea of the civilizing mission of the colonizer. For example, he said that in order to civilize a "native," the colonizer has to be more civilized than the native. He divided colonization into politico-military colonization and spiritual colonization. Spiritual colonization referred to the process of civilizing the local population.

Colonization was generally understood as the absorption or assimilation of weak nations by strong nations, but Nitobe rejected this understanding. He said that the purpose of Japanese colonial policy in Taiwan was not the assimilation of the Taiwanese population, but the development of the cultural and industrial environment to the same level as existed in Japan. Thus, he argued that the Japanese colonial government should not put pressure on the Taiwanese to become Japanese.

Instead, Nitobe propounded the ideal of the cooperative governance of colonies. Nitobe argued that colonial policy should reflect the customs, manners, and conditions of the people in the colony. He thought that the Japanese colonial government should not force Taiwanese to modify their customs and manners to fit the Japanese way of life. Japanese customs and systems should be introduced to Taiwan only when the Taiwanese adapted of their own accord to the Japanese way of life (Nitobe [1912] 1999-2001: 230).

Nitobe's attitude to colonies and the people in these colonies suggests that he had respect for other cultures, and considered it important to benefit the colonies. However, he assumed a difference in the level of civilization between the colonizer and the colonized.

For Nitobe, colonization meant the progress of civilization. Simultaneously, he assumed that colonization is an act of cultural goodwill made by "higher" nations for "lower" nations, like water flowing from highland to lowland. Thus, he emphasized the necessity of a high standard of civilization of the colonizer.

For example, when Nitobe rode in a rickshaw in colonial Korea, the Japanese rickshaw puller abused an innocent Korean quietly walking on the street. Nitobe said, "It made me so angry that I stopped the puller, and, jumping out of the *kuruma*—gave him a good thrashing" (Nitobe [1930] 1999-2001: 647-8). This story seemingly represents Nitobe's compassion for colonized people, but his anger was not aroused by sympathy for the innocent Korean. Nitobe became irate because the rickshaw man's act was not appropriate for a member of a civilized nation. Nitobe went on to say, "A patriot loves his country so well that he would not countenance any act which might reflect on the good name of his own people. When abroad, the humblest man is the type and representative of his country. How he behaves decides in a measure the reputation of his motherland." For Nitobe, this measure meant how civilized and it was a qualification test for a colonizer.

Nitobe saw the world as divided into civilized, cultivated, developed, and Westernized nations on the one hand and uncivilized, uncultivated, savage, and non-Westernized nations on the other. He also took it for granted that the inferior non-Western nations are colonized by superior

Westernized nations.

Nitobe regarded imperialism as competition of not only the politico-military might of a country, but also of its standard of civilization. He said that spiritual colonization was an issue that had developed in the twentieth century. He perceived the international situation enveloping Japan as a competition of civilization, which meant for him spiritual evolution. Nitobe thought that the winner of the global competition would be the nation that had evolved spiritually further than the other nations. For him, the winner should be a spiritual conqueror and should contribute to Eastern culture. Thus, he concluded his lecture, "Colonization is the spread of civilization" (Nitobe [1943] 1999-2001: 167).

## Conclusion

Employing a social Darwinist viewpoint, both Liang Qichao and Nitobe Inazo thought that it was necessary to transform people ethically in order to create social order and cohesion in all societies. For Liang, Buddhism, the concept of the "new people," and enlightened despotism served this function. All of these elements were supposed to edify individuals and integrate them into a "strong" nation. For Nitobe, *bushido*, cultivation, religion, and perhaps Christianity are similarly needed as a medium that edifies individuals and integrates the Japanese people into a single civilized nation. Both thinkers believed that at least one of these mediums was essential for building a strong nation to flourish in a world of the survival of the fittest.

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