Liang Qichao and the Conceptualization of “Race” in Late Qing China*

Peter Zarrow**

Abstract

Racial knowledge was a kind of “applied knowledge” that enabled late Qing intellectuals to pursue political modernization. The creation of modern Chinese identity depended on the science of biological race. Critical to this process was Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873-1929). Liang sought to situate the Chinese in a world of races and make it stronger. Much the same was true of late Qing revolutionaries, whose anti-Manchu nationalism was based on racial knowledge. Liang’s role was two-fold. First, he was pivotal to the introduction of racial knowledge to China. And second, in conversation with the revolutionaries, he was critical in establishing a deeply anti-hegemonic vision of the relationship between the races.

By the late nineteenth century, the concept of race was based on Western science. “Race” formed a building block of imperialism, but Liang and other intellectuals used racial knowledge to challenge the hegemony of
Western justifications of imperialism. For the most part, Liang insisted on the mutability of races, while he simultaneously proclaimed the "Yellow" race to be the equal of the "White" race. Liang was hardly immune from racialist attitudes, but his opposition to anti-Manchuism foreshadowed the multi-ethnic state that would emerge from the Revolution of 1911. Liang used racial knowledge to rewrite Chinese history and to position China in the world. Liang was not the only intellectual to do this, nor did he speak for all Chinese intellectuals. Yet by focusing on Liang, we can highlight how late Qing intellectuals could adopt new cultural and symbolic resources that were first wielded by the imperialist powers to their [the late Qing intellectuals'] own purposes.

Keywords: racial knowledge, Liang Qichao, late Qing, Revolution of 1911, imperialism, science

During the years of the Qing, from the late 1890s, "race" (種族) became a keyword in late Qing political discourse, centrally related to discussions of nationalism, evolution, and society among other topics, yet often ambiguous and multivalent. References to race could claim the imprimatur of Western science. In this sense, race was becoming part of the Chinese "knowledge system." Chinese intellectuals assumed the objective existence of "races," taking the racial divisions of the world for granted. Racial knowledge thus informed discussions of history and

1 Raymond Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
2 In considering racial knowledge to be part of the late Qing "knowledge system," I am trying to highlight its status at the time, not claiming its objective truth. A "knowledge system" is an interlocking set of beliefs that take on the status of assumptions or common sense—see Clifford Geertz, "Common Sense as a Cultural System," Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology (New York: Basic Books, 1983), pp. 73-93. Naturally, many scholars today are more comfortable speaking of "racial mythology" or "pseudo science" than "racial knowledge"—see, e.g., Philip Yale Nicholson, Who Do We Think We Are? Race and Nation in the Modern World (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), pp. 3, 6—but this article follows the tradition of the sociology of knowledge, and in that sense race had formed a