

"RENEWING THE PEOPLE"
By Liang Qichao

Introduction

Liang Qichao (1873-1929) was a young colleague and follower of Kang Youwei (1858-1927) during the failed "100 Days Reform" of 1898. When the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) put an end to the reform, Liang narrowly escaped arrest (and certain execution). He settled into exile in Japan, where he pursued a highly influential career as a writer and publisher of journals, including the popular fortnightly *Renewing the People* (*Xinmin congbao*), published between 1902 and 1905.

The following document is an excerpt from Liang's essay, "Renewing the People."

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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"Renewing the People"
By Liang Qichao

Since the appearance of mankind on earth, thousands of countries have existed ... All countries have the same sun and moon, all have mountains and rivers, and all consist of people with feet and skulls; but some countries rise while others fall, and some become strong while others are weak. Why? ... I know the reason. A state is formed by the assembling of people. ... If we wish the nation to be secure, rich, and honored, we must discuss the way for "renewing the people."

...

... There are two meanings of *renewing*. One is to improve what is original in the people and so renew it; the other is to adopt what is originally lacking in the people and so make a new people. ...

...

... Our people have been established as a nation on the Asian continent for several thousand years, and we must have some special characteristics that are grand, noble, and perfect, and distinctly different from those of other races. We should preserve these characteristics and not let them be lost. ...

...

Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQ) on “RENEWING THE PEOPLE,” BY LIANG QICHAO

If we wish to make the nation strong, we must investigate the methods followed by other nations in becoming independent. We should select their superior points and appropriate them to make up for our own shortcomings. ...

Questions:

1. From what philosophical or other ideas (Chinese and/or Western) does Liang Qichao draw in making these remarks?
2. What assumptions might Liang be making about the relationship between the people and the nation-state in these remarks?
3. How does Liang’s advice for making the country strong and independent compare to the ideas of earlier men, such as Yan Fu, Kang Youwei, and Feng Guifen?

Longer Selection

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“Renewing the People”

By Liang Qichao

Since the appearance of mankind on earth, thousands of countries have existed on the earth. Of these, however, only about a hundred still occupy a place on the map of the five continents. And among these hundred-odd countries there are only four or five great powers that are strong enough to dominate the world and to conquer nature. All countries have the same sun and moon, all have mountains and rivers, and all consist of people with feet and skulls; but some countries rise while others fall, and some become strong while others are weak. Why? Some attribute it to geographical advantages. But geographically, America today is the same as America in ancient times; why then do only the Anglo-Saxons enjoy the glory? Similarly, ancient Rome was the same as Rome today; why then have the Latin people declined in fame? Some attribute it to certain heroes. But Macedonia once had Alexander, and yet today it is no longer seen; Mongolia once had Chinggis Khan, and yet today it can hardly maintain its existence. Ah! I know the reason. A state is formed by the assembling of people. The relationship of a nation to its people resembles that of the body to its four limbs, five viscera, muscles, veins, and corpuscles. It has never happened that the four limbs could be cut off, the five viscera wasted away, the muscles and veins injured, the corpuscles dried up, and yet the body still live. Similarly, it has never happened that a people could be foolish, timid, disorganized, and confused and yet the nation still stand. Therefore, if we wish the body to live for a long time, we must understand the methods of hygiene. If we wish the nation to be secure, rich, and honored, we must discuss the way for “renewing the people.”

The Meaning of “Renewing the People”

The term *renewing the people* does not mean that our people must give up entirely what is old in order to follow others. There are two meanings of *renewing*. One is to improve what is original in the people and so renew it; the other is to adopt what is originally lacking in the people and so make a new people. Without both of these, there will be no success. ...

When a nation can stand up in the world its citizens must have a unique character. From morality and laws to customs, habits, literature, and the arts, these all possess a certain unique spirit. Then the ancestors pass them down and their descendants receive them. The group becomes unified and a nation is formed. This is truly the wellspring of nationalism. Our people have been established as a nation on the Asian continent for several thousand years, and we must have some special characteristics that are grand, noble, and perfect, and distinctly different from those of other races. We should preserve these characteristics and not let them be lost. What is called preserving, however, is not simply to let them exist and grow by themselves and then blithely say, “I am preserving them, I am preserving them.” It is like a tree: unless some new buds come out every year, its withering away may soon be expected. Or like a well: unless there is always some new spring bubbling, its exhaustion is not far away.

Is it enough merely to develop what we already have? No, it is not. The world of today is not the world of yesterday. In ancient times, we Chinese were people of villages instead of citizens. This is not because we were unable to form a citizenry but due to circumstances. Since China majestically used to be the predominant power in the East, surrounded as we were by small barbarian groups and lacking any contact with other large states, we Chinese generally considered our state to encompass the whole world. All the messages we received, all that influenced our minds, all the instructions of our sages, and all that our ancestors passed down qualified us to be individuals on our own, family members, members of localities and clans, and members of the world. But they did not qualify us to be citizens of a state. Although the qualifications of citizenship are not necessarily much superior to these other characteristics, in an age of struggle among nations for the survival of the fittest while the weak perish, if the qualities of citizens are wanting, then the nation cannot stand up independently between Heaven and earth.

If we wish to make our nation strong, we must investigate extensively the methods followed by other nations in becoming independent. We should select their superior points and appropriate them to make up for our own shortcomings. Now with regard to politics, academic learning, and technology, our critics know how to take the superior points of others to make up for our own weakness; but they do not know that the people’s virtue, the people’s wisdom, and the people’s vitality are the great basis of politics, academic learning, and techniques. If they do not take the former but adopt the latter, neglect the roots but tend the branches, it will be no different from seeing the luxuriant growth of another tree and wishing to graft its branches onto our withered trunk, or seeing the bubbling flow of another well and wishing to draw its water to fill our dry well. Thus, how to adopt and make up for what we originally lacked so that our people may be renewed should be deeply and carefully considered.

Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQ) on “RENEWING THE PEOPLE,” BY LIANG QICHAO

All phenomena in the world are governed by no more than two principles: the conservative and the progressive. Those who are applying these two principles are inclined either to the one or to the other. Sometimes the two arise simultaneously and conflict with each other; sometimes the two exist simultaneously and compromise with each other. No one can exist if he is inclined only to one. Where there is conflict, there must be compromise. Conflict is the forerunner of compromise.

Those who excel at making compromises become a great people, such as the Anglo-Saxons, who, in a manner of speaking, make their way with one foot on the ground and one foot going forward, or who hold fast to things with one hand and pick up things with another. Thus, what I mean by “renewing the people” does not refer to those who are infatuated with Western ways and, in order to keep company with others, throw away our morals, learning, and customs of several thousand years’ standing. Nor does it refer to those who stick to old paper and say that merely embracing the morals, learning, and customs of these thousands of years will be sufficient to enable us to stand upon the great earth.