Chinese Roots of Political Religion: Statism in Modern China, 1897-1924

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Abstract

The concept of "political religion" has not been adequately applied to the study of political thought in modern China. This article intends to demonstrate the theoretical potential of political religion in deepening our understanding of Chinese political thought by offering a preliminary analysis of the evolution of statism in China at the turn of the twentieth century. As a political aspiration of constructing a strong China in the modern world, statism has led many Chinese political thinkers to imbue the search for ways of strengthening the state with eschatological fervour. By examining the thoughts of Liang Qichao, Sun Yat-sen, and early Chinese Marxists, I argue that the persistent theme of viewing a strong state as the guardian of Chinese civilization and the trailblazer for future humanity has contributed substantially to the popularization of the political religion of Marxism-Leninism. The tenacity of statist ideals in today's party-state can also be seen as having inherited the religiosity of the quest for a modern China that began in the early twentieth century.

KEYWORDS political religion, statism, Marxism-Leninism, totalitarianism

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I am a third-year PhD student in History at SOAS. Currently, my project seeks to trace the rise of statism in modern China back to the internal context of intellectual developments from the early nineteenth century to the eve of 1895. The ultimate question I intend to raise is why statism, a strand of thought upholding the state as the worldly embodiment of cosmic authority and the highest source of good, would prevail in modern China. More specifically, by situating statism within the broader intellectual landscape of nineteenth century China, I pay special attention to the cosmological legacy bequeathed upon statecraft agendas and reform movements, which greatly enhanced the tenacity of statism in modern China. In addition, I look closely at the nineteenth century literati's self-image, as their political thought evolved in response to changing socio-political situations.

Introduction

Before developing its own modernity, China is generally regarded as a civilization with distinct ontological visions among the Axial civilizations.[1] Irrespective of whether the Axial Age paradigm is accepted or not, the juxtaposition of China and other worldly civilizations, especially the West, presupposes fundamental differences inherent in each culture. It is no wonder, then, that the modern transformation of China, which saw the total disruption of the imperial order under Qing rule, was once understood by scholars like John K. Fairbank as "China's response to the West" in Western historiography.[2] In recent decades, however, this stereotype has been challenged and surpassed by scholars devoted to "discovering history in China."[3] Seen in this light, China's 'century of revolution' should also be reconsidered as more than the mere outcome of foreign impacts. I would go further to argue that the eventual establishment of revolutionary regimes in twentieth-century China has its foundation rooted in the historical evolution of modern Chinese political thought. By upholding statist doctrines through the delicate appropriation of Western ideas, Chinese political thinkers descried the most powerful expression of their ideals in the revolutionary ideology of Marxism-Leninism. To elaborate on this point, I will examine the quests for a modern Chinese state by prominent political thinkers from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century through the lens of political religion. In doing so, I will ask the following questions: Did the elements already exist in Chinese political thought that were prone to the adoption of the political religion of Marxism-Leninism? How was Chinese statism expressed through the rhetoric of Marxism-Leninism? Did religious sentiments play a role in early Chinese Marxists' advocacy of such an ideology?

Several points ought to be clarified before beginning our investigation. The study of intellectual history in modern scholarship has placed considerable emphasis on the contextualization of the evolution of ideas, which accords with R. G. Collingwood's distinction

[1] S.N. Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 33-56.

[2] Ssu-yü Teng and John King Fairbank, *China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839-1923* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).

[3] Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

of an event as having an outside "in terms of bodies and their movements" and an inside that can only be perceived "in terms of thought." For Collingwood, it is the historian's central task to think through every action in the event when understanding the agents' rationale behind such actions.[4] Yet such a sociological approach always risks exaggerating or marginalizing the real influence of the event in question vis-à-vis conceptual transformations based on the historian's pre-established narrative, even if the slight possibility of acquiring the "right horizon of inquiry" in studying historical mind-sets is granted.[5] Moreover, the unfolding of historical events, which constitutes the external process of intellectual evolution, is closely but not necessarily related to the intrinsic properties of ideas. The analysis of the history of ideas thus cannot be distracted by the multitude of background information.[6] Hence, I prefer to adopt an intellectual approach in this article, which focuses on the inner logic of ideas and how they are symbolically perceived, appropriated, and reinvented by individual thinkers in contribution to a general discourse and in their construction of a symbolically meaningful world.[7] The dynamics of Chinese politics and social transformations in the period concerned should therefore receive minimal attention due to the consistency of my discussion. The idiosyncrasies of political thinkers and the philological textual study of their works, which well deserve a standalone analysis, are also omitted since they do not constitute the essence of the symbolic formation of ideas that generates a life of its own.[8]

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[4] R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, rev. ed., with lectures 1926–1928 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 213–7.

[5] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd, rev. ed. translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, Continuum Impacts (London: Continuum, 2004), 301–2.

[6] For a similar discussion, see Lao Sze-kwang, *Xinbian Zhongguo zhexue shi*, vol. 1 (Taipei: Sanmin chubanshe, 2012), 1–20.

[7] On man's symbolic creativity, see Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1944).

[8] See Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Volume 4: The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, eds. John Michael Krois and Donald Philip Verene, trans. John Michael Krois (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996).

Political Religion and Its Applicability to China

Though the study of religious elements in political movements can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century, apart from the interpretative tradition of totalitarianism, it is only in recent decades that "political religion" as a concretized conceptual toolkit has been used in the comparison of dictatorships.[9] And just like totalitarianism, the very definition of political religion is widely debated and the legitimacy of describing political phenomena using religious categories is called into question from time to time. Hence, by adopting a historical approach, some scholars suggest the concept be tested out on Communism, National Socialism, and Fascism with respect to the question of truth, to rituals aimed at constructing faithful communities, and to the totalitarian understanding of politics.[10] From this point of view, political religion seems to be applicable only to societies where totalitarian regimes are or were once established. Hence, it will be problematic for the case of China, since the totalitarian model has long been deemed inadequate for the study of state-society relations in the country due to the institutional dynamics and the violent outbreak of the Cultural Revolution that defied totalitarian control by a rigid bureaucratic system in Maoist China.[11]

However, in the ideological dimension, China can be regarded as a case in point to interpret the political religion of Marxism-Leninism.[12] Some recent studies have also extended the scope beyond totalitarianism in deploying political religion to examine the sacralization of

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[9] Hans Maier, "Concepts for the comparison of dictatorships," in *Totalitarianism and Political Religions, Volume 1: Concepts for the Comparison of Dictatorships*, ed. Hans Maier (London: Routledge, 2004), 188-203.

[10] Philippe Burrin, "Concluding discussion," in *Totalitarianism and Political Religions, Volume II: Concepts for the Comparison of Dictatorships*, ed. Michael Schäfer and Hans Maier (London: Routledge, 2007), 165-167.

[11] Vivienne Shue, *The Reach of the State: Sketches of the Chinese Body Politic* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988), 12-14; Margaret M. Pearson, *China's New Business Elite: The Political Consequences of Economic Reform* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1997), 23. Mao Zedong's encouragement of mass movement during the Cultural Revolution, though intended to consolidate his personal rule, in effect dismantled the foundation of Soviet-style totalitarian regime by sweeping away the existent party-state establishments. See Andrew G. Walder, *China Under Mao: A Revolution Derailed* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 180-314.

[12] Klaus-Georg Riegel, "Marxism-Leninism as political religion," in *Totalitarianism and Political Religions, Volume II: Concepts for the Comparison of Dictatorships*, ed. Michael Schäfer and Hans Maier (London: Routledge, 2007), 61-112.

politics even in Western democracy.[13] Thus, the kaleidoscope of approaches to the nebulous term should encourage us to think outside the box instead of deterring us from making useful connections between political cultures. Of the many attributes political religion possesses, the one that stands out is the elevation of the state to a soteriological status as being the sole source of reality. Through a teleological interpretation of history and a messianic vision for the future, the immediacy of inner-worldly salvation is proclaimed, and the state becomes the locus of such a salvation. Eric Voegelin, a pioneer in the field, depicted this process as the state transforming individual experience to a supra-human reality.[14] Therefore, political religion can be narrowly defined as a set of beliefs and ideologies fusing statist doctrines with religious appeals. As we shall see, Chinese political thinkers in the early twentieth century frequently imbued the notion of a puissant state with eschatological fervour. In this sense, deploying the term 'political religion' in the examination of statism in early twentieth century China is well justified.

To demonstrate the religiosity of proposals for a puissant state in early twentieth century Chinese political thought, in what follows, I will first look at the conceptualization of the state by notable political thinkers in the late Qing and early Republican period. Then I shall examine the rationale behind early Chinese Marxists' advocacy of Marxist conceptions of the state. In doing so, I intend to capture a persistent theme of the statist aspiration to build a strong China in the modern world through analysing connections of the inner logic in their respective theoretical constructions. My discussion will thus be focused on the anatomy of ideas per se while minimizing the inclusion of background information which may prove to be confusing rather than illuminating.

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[13] Joost Augusteijn, Patrick Dassen, and Maartje Janse, *Political Religion Beyond Totalitarianism: The Sacralization of Politics in the Age of Democracy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[14] Dietmar Herz, "The concept of 'political religions' in the thought of Eric Voegelin," in *Totalitarianism and Political Religions, Volume I: Concepts for the Comparison of Dictatorships*, ed. Hans Maier (London: Routledge, 2004), 150-151.

State as Cure: Liang Qichao and Statism in the Late Qing Period

China's transformation from empire to nation-state is unquestionably shaped by external forces, often in the form of Western aggression. Yet historical identity also played a nonnegligible role in making the state as Chinese as it is modern. Already in the early nineteenth century, traditional Chinese literati were putting forward constitutional agendas in response to the novel situations generated in previous centuries.[15] By the 1890s, when the relative peace of the Tongzhi Restoration had given way to renewed waves of imperialist intrusions, the Qing state became utterly incapable of defending China against mounting foreign threats. The Qing's defeat in the 1894 Sino-Japanese War further revealed China's weakness and invited a wave of imperialist invasions that threatened the "partition of China."[16] In the face of such desperate situations, reforming the falling empire to rescue the Chinese civilization became an increasingly pressing matter.

When explaining the need for transition from monarchy to democracy, Liang Qichao (梁啟超, 1873-1929), the eminent reformer and political thinker, firstly declared the teachings of *Chunqiu* (春秋) as profound in forecasting three ages of human civilization: aristocracy, monarchy, and democracy. Then, by dividing each age into two stages, Liang came up with six types of polities (tribal, feudal, monarchical, constitutional, presidential, and parliamentary) respectively. He asserted that these polities must unfold in an orderly sequence: "When the time is not due, no one can stride over it (the emergence of new polities). When the time has come, no one can obstruct it."[17] Though paying reverence to Confucian classics, Liang was following his master Kang Youwei (康有為, 1858-1927) in situating monarchy on an evolutionary scale to

[15] Philip A. Kuhn, *Origins of the Modern Chinese State* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002).

[16] Mary Clabaugh Wright, *The Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism: The T'ung-Chih Restoration, 1862-1874* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957); Immanuel C. Y. Hsu, "Late Ch'ing Foreign Relations, 1866-1905," in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 11, Late Ch'ing 1800–1911, Part 2*, ed. John K. Fairbank and Kwang-Ching Liu (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 101-15.

[17] Liang Qichao, "Lun junzheng minzheng xiangshan zhi li," (On principles of the transformation from monarchy to democracy) in *Yinbingshi heji wenji*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2015), 139.

point out its historical role and emphasize the inevitability of its change. As social Darwinist as it may sound, Liang's approach was more sophisticated when he went on to provide a historical account of how different polities corresponding to different stages developed over time. For Liang, in the primitive age (i.e., Age of Disorder, *Juluan shi* 據亂世), clans of people suffered from endless warfare since "whoever has blood and energy (*xueqi* 血氣) has the propensity to compete." The emergence of feudal states and later monarchy was the persistent effort to sanction conflicts and regulate human behaviours.[18] This implicitly Hobbesian line of argument enabled Liang to call for the progression of the Chinese state into the contemporaneous polity of democracy in a sense of promoting Chinese civilization in particular and human civilization in general. But even for the West, where democracy had been effectively implemented, the final Age of Great Peace (*Taiping shi* 太平世) was yet to be achieved since polities that belonged to previous ages still existed. The reform of China's monarchy thus took on a messianic hue as being part of the global evolution in politics to advance human civilization into a new epoch. This message was more clearly delivered in Liang's depiction of "the fate of Earth (*dadi zhiyun* 大地之運)" where it was said that the fate originated in the Kunlun Mountains and initially moved to allow India, Persia, Babylon, and Egypt to prosper. Then it made its way to Europe resulting in the flourishing of first ancient Greece and Rome and then modern nations such as France and England. After that, the fate went across the Pacific to East Asia and brought about Japan's rise. As it would continue eastward, China's thriving was bound to be imminent in the next decade.[19] Liang's mythical reconstruction of the vicissitudes of world civilizations conflated political reform with religious sentiment, empowering the state to act in the name of cosmic power. And it is precisely through the concept of power that the religious sphere encroached into the definition of the state, as the state is empowered through being depicted as the sole agent in

[18] Ibid., 139-142.

[19] Liang Qichao, "Lun Zhongguo zhi jiangqiang," (On the coming revitalization of China) in *Yinbingshi heji wenji*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2015), 148.

actualizing messianic visions.[20] Hence, before the fateful reform of 1898, intellectuals like Liang had begun to vest in the state religious characteristics.

The utter failure of the 1898 Reform and the consequent disastrous Boxer Rebellion disillusioned Liang of any attempt to swiftly transform China into a modern state. However, his statist stance was only enhanced as Liang reflected upon recent events and engaged systematically with Western political theories.[21] While exploring the reasons why China was then weak, Liang blamed Chinese ideals, customs, politics, and current affairs.[22] By ideals, Liang meant the traditional Chinese conception of political order, and for him, there were three strands of thought that led to the enfeeblement of China: ignorance of the difference between the state and all under Heaven (*tianxia* 天下), ignorance of the boundary between the state and the imperial court, and ignorance of the relationship between the state and its people. Through the hammer of the state, all three pillars of political order, namely, Heaven, the Emperor, and the people, were dismantled by Liang, and by accusing Chinese people of being slave-minded, fatuous, selfish, pretentious, craven, and lethargic, Liang hinted at a thorough transformation of the spiritual world of ordinary Chinese as the prerequisite for building a strong Chinese state. Interestingly, Liang described this process as healing a patient whereby "good doctors must first investigate the origins of the disease. The longer the disease lasts, the more profound the origins. The more severe the disease, the more complicated the origins."[23] In Liang's mind, the cure was explicitly expressed in his translation of the German political theorist Johann Kaspar Bluntschli's (1808-1881) formulation of the state as being organic. By citing Bluntschli's assertion that "scholars since the eighteenth century have regarded citizens as society and the state as the

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[20] Hans Otto Seitschek, "The interpretation of totalitarianism as religion," in *Totalitarianism and Political Religions, Volume III: Concepts for the Comparison of Dictatorships - Theory & History of Interpretations*, ed. Jodi Bruhn and Hans Maier (London: Routledge, 2007), 122.

[21] Peter Gue Zarrow, *After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885-1924* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2012), 120.

[22] Liang Qichao, "Zhongguo jiruo suyuan lun," (On origins of China's accumulating weakness) in *Yinbingshi heji wenji*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2015), 396-426.

[23] Ibid., 397.

cumulation of individuals…which is not the case,”[24] Liang completely moved away from the more liberal conception of the state as in the social contract theory associated with Rousseau,[25] which appeared in his earlier writings as the ideal model for political modernization.[26] According to Bluntschli, the state was the combination of body and spirit and therefore was able to grow and develop in response to changing environments as opposed to machines. Citizens were the very embodiment of the state and could express its will and rights. In this way, the identity of modern individuals was defined by the state, and the process of healing was reverted. In order to transform the Chinese spirit, the state must be elevated as the locus of such a transformation (i.e., the cure). Thus claimed Liang:

> Today, China’s biggest disadvantage and what it lacks most are organic unity and coercive order. Liberty and equality are really secondary… We must mold clan people (*bumin* 部民) into citizens of a nation (*guomin* 國民) first, and only then can we talk about their happiness. Like Bluntschli said, social contract theory suits the society, not the state. If it is not used correctly, citizens might be dissolved and returned to clan people, not the other way around.[27]

Convinced of the organic nature of the state, Liang was quick to disseminate his ideas and agendas as the sole cure for a sick and debilitated China through captivating rhetoric.[28] In doing so, he turned farther away from the liberal tradition and leaned toward statism with religious fervour to save China as a civilization from total devastation. Unlike nationalism, with its anthropocentric focus on the political arrangements of peoples in the secular world,[29] Liang viewed the state as representing the authority of a higher order dictating human affairs. This could partly explain his advocacy of constitutional monarchy, which partially retained the image of an emperor as the Son of Heaven in the last years of Qing rule. Liang was not alone in

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[24] Liang Qichao, “Zhengzhixue dajia Bolunzhili zhi xueshuo,” (Theories of the eminent political scholar Bluntschli) in *Yinbingshi heji wenji*, vol. 5 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2015), 1188.

[25] For Rousseau, however justified a sovereign is by general will of the public, it must be based on the consent of autonomous individuals to relinquished their partial freedom in exchange of order and protection of rights by the state. Liang at this stage, however, saw the state as self-legitimizing and a precondition for individual welfare.

[26] Zarrow, *After Empire*, 125-127.

[27] Liang Qichao, “Zhengzhixue dajia,” 1187.

[28] Liu Wanming, “Fuyan ‘Guojia shenti’: Liang Qichao yu ‘shengbing de Zhongguo’ xingxiang zhi sanbu,” *Zhongshan daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* 57, no. 06 (2017): 27–37.

[29] Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (London: Hutchinson, 1960).

propagating statist doctrines, but what he had in mind was fundamentally different from the republican conception of the state by Late Qing revolutionaries, such as Sun Yat-sen (孫中山, 1866-1925).

State as Legislator: The Image of Republican China in Sun Yat-sen

By stressing the homologous nature of the state and the human body, Liang Qichao was meant to keep the Qing state at least nominally intact. After all, a good doctor would never destroy the human body in order to cure a disease. Yet clearly this analogy was not accepted by everyone, and those with a republican vision of the future Chinese state fervently propagated their agenda through the rhetoric of revolution. Sun Yat-sen in 1897 described this view succinctly as "holding popular sovereignty as the ultimate creed and thus adopting republicanism in politics. And how can republicanism be achieved outright? I thereby claim the responsibility of revolution." Similar to Liang, Sun also excavated Chinese traditions in support of his agenda: "Republicanism is the soul of governance in our country and the legacy of past sages. Those talking about ancient times all emulate governance in the time of Three Dynasties (*Sandai* 三代), but little do they know that Three Dynasties actually espoused the soul of republicanism in their political process."[30] Through the metaphor of Three Dynasties, Sun shifted the Chinese ideal of the Golden Age from ancient times to the tangible future. The eschatological character of Sun's republicanism became more apparent when he openly denied the incremental approach to China's political reform in a 1905 speech to Chinese overseas students in Tokyo and stated that "trains on railroads were initially ill-designed and only modified afterward. When China decides to build railroads, should we use the ill-designed trains or modified ones? ... Also, constitutional monarchies around the world must be founded by blood so as to be genuinely constitutional. Why should we adopt the defected constitutional monarchy (instead of republicanism) if blood

[30] Sun Yat-sen, "Yu Gongqi Yinzang Pingshan Zhou de tanhua," (Conversations with Gongqi Yinzang Pingshan Zhou) in *Sun Zhongshan quanji*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 172-173.

has to be shed?"[31] Here Sun was appealing to political martyrdom with a certain degree of religious piety with regard to republicanism through the rhetoric of blood. In this way, resorting to revolutionary measures could be seen as a process of purification as one demonstrates his devotion to republican ideals. Ultimately, this purification must be conducted among all Chinese people for popular sovereignty to be established. Thus Sun in his 1906 strategic plan for revolution claimed that "previous ages were times for hero's revolutions, now is the time for national revolution. National revolution means all people in the country possess the spirit of liberty, equality and fraternity so that they all shoulder the responsibility of revolution."[32] Values of Western liberalism were then appropriated to serve the Chinese revolution, the exclusive nature of which derived its legitimacy from the elevation of Republican China to a soteriological status with eschatological fervour, at least among revolutionaries. Any moderate proposals would be oppugned not only in the name of progression but also with religious ardour.

Despite ex post facto propaganda, revolutionary uprisings before the 1911 Revolution received little public support within China.[33] The harsh political realities after the establishment of the Republic of China also sparked widespread resentment against central authority, resulting in the militarization of the political order and the rise of local strongmen.[34] Worst of all, the momentous revolution failed to transform the political tradition of rule *by* law into rule *of* law, rendering legislative attempts in the first few years of the fledgling republic disastrous power struggles that exhausted political tolerance and endangered state authority.[35] Witnessing how Republican China turned out to be anything but the Elysium the revolutionaries dreamed of, Sun Yat-sen altered his idealist stance and worked out a more practical outline for guiding national reconstruction in the wake of warlordism that ravaged the political landscape of China and

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[31] Sun Yat-sen, "Zai Dongjing liuxuesheng huanyinghui shang de yanshuo," (Welcome speech for oversea students in Tokyo) in *Sun Zhongshan quanji*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 283.

[32] Sun Yat-sen, "Zhongguo tongmenghui geming fanglue," (Strategies of Revolution for Tongmenghui) in *Sun Zhongshan quanji*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 296.

[33] Zhou Jianchao, *Mimi shehui yu Zhongguo minzhu geming* (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 2002), 55-56.

[34] Mary Backus Rankin, "State and Society in Early Republican Politics, 1912-18," *The China Quarterly*, no. 150 (1997): 263-269.

[35] Li Jiannong, *Zhongguo jin bainian zhengzhishi, 1840-1926* (Wuhan: Wuhan daxue chubanshe, 2006), 332-333.

substantially undermined the central authority of the state.[36] Tellingly, the image of Republican China in Sun's reconstruction plan revealed his own version of statism. Firstly, by admitting the inadequacy of nation-building up to his time, Sun attributed this inadequacy to the lack of a proper sequence in deploying Three People's Principles (*sanmin zhuyi* 三民主義):

> If the nation does not go through the period of military administration (*junzheng* 軍政), counter-revolutionary forces could never be extirpated, and revolutionary doctrines could never spread among the populace to gain their understanding and support. If the nation does not go through the period of political tutelage (*xunzheng* 訓政), the people who have been long enslaved and recently liberated would never know new ways of life. Then they would either stick to their old ways of irresponsibility or be used by counter-revolutionaries unknowingly. The biggest problem of the former is that revolution cannot reach its complete destruction (of counter-revolutionaries). The biggest problem of the latter is that reconstruction cannot be carried out.[37]

Hence, the subsequent process of national reconstruction should strictly follow the steps laid out respectively in the three periods of military administration, political tutelage, and constitutionalism (*xianzheng* 憲政) to ensure the successful transformation of China into a modern republic. Furthermore, the notion of popular sovereignty reappeared during political tutelage, as local autonomy at the county level would extend to the provincial level and, finally, the national level.[38] This seemingly bottom-up manner of political formation would contradict statist doctrines. Yet a closer look at Sun's logic shows that he presupposed the presence of a strong state as the basis for superimposing Republican agendas onto local communities. Thus, political propaganda was necessary since military administration to "civilize" (*kaihua* 開化) commoners and, in the period of political tutelage, state-sponsored appointees would assist local governments in properly establishing local autonomy. Moreover, only those wholeheartedly

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[36] For the early Republican history of politics and warlordism, see James E. Sheridan, "The Warlord Era: Politics and Militarism under the Peking Government, 1916-28," in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 12, Republican China, 1912–1949, Part 1*, ed. John K. Fairbank (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 284-321.

[37] Sun Yat-sen, "Zhiding jianguo dagang xuanyan," (Declaration of Fundamentals of National Reconstruction) in *Guofu quanji*, vol. 2 (Taipei: Jindai Zhongguo chubanshe, 1989), 172.

[38] Ibid.

advocating revolutionary creeds were seen as qualified candidates in local elections.[39] Therefore, Sun Yat-sen vested his image of Republican China with the role of legislator in the sense of not only bulwarking constitutional authority but also directing the minds of ordinary people by giving laws for new life in the name of revolution. In this way, the secular power of the state is united with the spiritual power of ideology.[40] The religiosity of this image is very clear.

For both Liang and Sun, the state was indispensable in transforming imperial subjects into a modern national community. As efforts to establish a rule of law in the early Republican period were encumbered by devastating power politics, the very notion became doubted and even mocked.[41] As a result, imbuing ordinary Chinese people with a sense of national identity was increasingly associated with fostering their revolutionary instead of legal consciousness. Hence, while Sun Yat-sen regarded the state as legislator, his conception was soon to be superseded by more powerful rhetoric in the ideology of Marxism-Leninism.

State as Guardian: The Political Religion of Early Chinese Marxists

Although Sun Yat-sen did not hesitate to harness the power of the Soviet Union when pushing forward his revolutionary agenda against the warlords, he remained reserved about its communist vision.[42] Yet the Soviet ideology (i.e., Marxism-Leninism) had been attracting the minds of solicitous Chinese who bolstered revolutionary ideals since 1919 in the search for the means to construct a strong Chinese state similar to that of Sun. When introducing Marxism-Leninism to the Chinese public, Li Dazhao (李大釗, 1889-1927), allegedly the first Chinese Marxist, zealously proclaimed:

[39] Sun Yat-sen, "Jianguo dagang: Guomin zhengfu jianguo dagang," (Fundamentals of National Reconstruction) in *Guofu quanji*, vol. 1 (Taipei: Jindai Zhongguo chubanshe, 1989), 623.

[40] Peter Bernholz, "Ideology, sects, state and totalitarianism," in *Totalitarianism and Political Religions, Volume II: Concepts for the Comparison of Dictatorships*, ed. Michael Schäfer and Hans Maier (London: Routledge, 2007), 247-252.

[41] Chen Zhirang, *Junshen zhengquan* (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1980), 108-112.

[42] Liu Zhichao and Hu Yuhai, *Minguo Junfa Shilue* (Shenyang: Liaoning daxue chubanshe, 1998), 163.

> Those first enlightened in Europe are now calling for peace for the people. No emperors, no armies and no secret diplomacy. We need national self-determination and the European Union as the basis for a worldly union. This signals the dawn of a new epoch.[43]

For Li, Marxism-Leninism apparently served as the prophetic blueprint for the most advanced civilization in the world. By referring to the slogan 'national self-determination' after the Versailles Peace Conference, Li implied that an independent China would join forces with other nations in fulfilling the destiny (a worldly union) of mankind. This messianic vision was the general mentality for many Chinese intellectuals to adopt the theories of Marxism-Leninism on national issues.[44] As the initial zeal concretized to the systematic learning of theories, their statist stance gradually crystallized. Li Da (李達, 1890-1966), another prominent early Marxist, explained that "to analyze the nature of the state, we see that class interests are its end while the common good is its means. The reason why the state belongs to a certain class and acts as its tool of exploitation to procure its existence lies in the joint force of this end and means."[45] The notion of class struggle was adroitly utilized by Li Da in his analysis of the state, which for him exists solely for the exploitation of classes. But while maximizing the interests of the exploiting class, the state also satisfies certain needs of the exploited class so as to maintain order. And the state is endowed with such power because the exploiting class controls the economy. Thus, Qu Qiubai (瞿秋白, 1899-1935) wrote that "the state is an organization dominated by the ruling class…an organization formed due to economic development that enabled this class to enforce its will upon other classes."[46] By introducing the rhetoric of class into the discourse, Marxist conceptions of the state bestowed upon Chinese radicals a powerful theoretical weapon to expound the root of the Chinese state's weakness. Failures to build a strong modern Chinese state simply resulted from the fact that such attempts were led by economically backward and morally corrupt classes;

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[43] Li Dazhao, "Xin jiyuan," (New epoch) in *Li Dazhao quanji*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1999), 268.

[44] Lu Junda, "Shilun 'Tianxiaguan' yu Zhongguo gongchandang minzu lilun de guanlian," *Heilongjiang minzu congkan*, no. 144 (2015): 25–30.

[45] Li Da, "Jieji yu guojia," (Class and state) in *Li Da wenji*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1980), 328.

[46] Qu Qiubai, "Guofaxue yu laonongzhengfu," (State law and peasant government) in *Qu Qiubai wenji: Zhengzhi lilun bian*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2013), 146.

only the proletariat would be able to direct historical development and restore China to a puissant state in the destined global revolution.

Such eschatological fervour was explicitly manifested in early Chinese Marxists' writings on the ineluctability of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Since the political superstructure is determined by the economic infrastructure, all dominating institutions at the moment would be ultimately superseded. As Qu put it, "Capitalism is a temporary phenomenon like all previous economic stages. The development of productive forces and struggles by the advanced class are bound to bring its downfall."[47] More positively, dictatorship of the proletariat could in theory promote production to a great extent. Li Dazhao claimed that "it (dictatorship of the proletariat) is not aimed at harming production but questing for progressive and appropriate production, namely, redistributing production to incubate its unity so as to avoid chaos."[48] In addition, to ensure that the proletariat stays in power, a state with cogent forces to safeguard class interests was imperative. Thus, rejecting the utopian elements of the future proletariat in China, Li Da maintained that "prison is necessary, so is a police force, since we must deal with enemies of communism. The army is also necessary, since we must fight against capitalist rivals."[49] Now the state was depicted as the guardian for the novice Chinese proletariat, who under its aegis would accomplish the great socialist revolution in China. The very success of such a revolution would bring China back to the spearhead of human evolution in historical materialism, indicating the resurgence of Chinese civilization buttressed by an almighty modern Chinese state. Statism was therefore fused with religious sentiments forecasting a this-worldly salvation (i.e., global communist revolution) and the state elevated as the guardian of the revolution (i.e., the locus of salvation). This was summarized concisely by Cai Hesen (蔡和森, 1895-1931) in his letter to the young Mao Zedong: "No collectivization and socialization of

47 Qu Qiubai, "Shehui zhexue gailun," (An introduction to social philosophy) in *Qu Qiubai wenji: Zhengzhi lilun bian*, vol. 2, 333.

48 Li Dazhao, "Shehui zhuyi yu shehui yundong," (Socialism and social movements) in *Li Dazhao quanji*, vol. 4 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1999), 196-197.

49 Li Da, "Wuzhengfu zhuyi zhi jiepou," (Analysis of anarchism) in *Li Da wenji*, vol. 1, 90.

property without the state…No protection of the revolution or against counter-revolutionaries without the state."[50]

Conclusion

Since the collapse of the Chinese empire, disruptive shockwaves to the traditional political order have lingered on, and struggles over the political meaning emerging therefrom extended from the twentieth century to the present day. Nevertheless, statist doctrines upheld by competing visions, regardless of their ideological affiliations, have been gaining currency in modern Chinese political discourse.[51] As we have seen, Chinese political thinkers, such as Liang Qichao, had ascribed soteriological characteristics to the state using the metaphor of curing a sick body even before the demise of empire. Liang's effort to create a modern national identity was then radicalized by revolutionary visions like that in Sun Yat-sen's imagining of a Republican China, where the state was regarded as legislator in ordaining laws to civilize Chinese people. Such revolutionary zeal eventually found its most powerful expression in the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, which ingeniously accommodated eschatological fervour by depicting the state as the guardian of the messianic global revolution. Early Chinese Marxists were thus fully imbued with religious sentiments when propagating the political visions of Marxism-Leninism. Moreover, they continued the statist aspiration promoted by previous thinkers like Liang and Sun and came up with the most feasible plan in their eyes to actualize the enterprise of constructing a strong Chinese state. The ideological gravity Marxism-Leninism ascribed to the state during the communist revolution and the success of state-building in the Soviet Union had convinced many Chinese that Marxism-Leninism was the sine qua non to realize the ideal of building a strong China, which might very well underlie their acceptance of such a political theory.

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50 Cai Hesen, "Guanyu Zhongguo geming wenti zhi Mao Zedong tongzhi de liangfeng xin," (Two letters to comrade Mao Zedong on Chinese revolution) in *Cai Hesen wenji*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1980), 51.

51 Zarrow, *After Empire*, 295-320.

From the beginning, Chinese political thinkers have been appropriating ideas of Western political theories to expound their ideals concerning essentially Chinese formulations of a proper cosmic order. The continuous search for a strong state as the guardian of Chinese civilization and the trailblazer for future humanity has made them susceptible to the enchanting visions offered by political religion. In addition, the religiosity of their quests contributed greatly to the eventual adoption of the political religion of Marxism-Leninism and the establishment of the revolutionary regimes of KMT and CCP in twentieth century China. Even today, the party-state still strives to secure its legitimacy by portraying itself as the culmination of the historical destiny of Chinese civilization epitomized by the ascendancy of a strong Chinese state on the world stage.[52] Chinese political religion was thus the outgrowth of a combination of factors shaped no less by particular realities at home than by the "Age of Extremes" on a global scale.[53] The history of revolution and the roots of radical politics in modern China thus defy the impact-response model deployed by Fairbank and require us to shift attention instead to the internal dynamics of Chinese politics and political thought. It would also be fruitful when scholars reflect upon the concepts derived from Western contexts and attempt to address Chinese political culture on their own terms.

52 Richard McGregor, *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 229-262.

53 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 21-224.

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