

Liu Shiwei's Concept of Class

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Abstract: This paper aims to discuss the concept of class in the works of Liu Shiwei, a Chinese revolutionary intellectual. When discussing the ethnic revolution of Manchuria, Liu first included class in the description of Chinese system, ethics and Chinese society. After he crossed to Japan and accepted the anarchist revolutionary ideas of hardliners, he used class as a broad synonym for hierarchical society and various inequalities. After understanding and recognizing the Marxist class struggle thought, Liu turned his attention to China. Liu started from the issue of Chinese people's livelihood to find the subject and object of China's anarchic class revolution. Class became the concept carrier of his narration of class revolution, and its semantic domain was further expanded. Through the analysis, we can see that Liu's understanding and use of the concept of class is closely related to his revolutionary ideas, and changes accordingly.

Keywords: Liu Shiwei, class, revolution, anarchism

Liu Shiwei (刘师培) was born into a family of prominent classical scholars in Yangzhou in 1884. In May 1903, he participated in the last round of metropolitan examinations conducted in the history of imperial China, but without success. In autumn of the same year, he got to know the revolutionary intellectuals Zhang Taiyan (1869-1936) and Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940) in Shanghai. Out of dissatisfaction with the Qing government and because of his admiration for the heroism of Zhang, he changed his name to Guanghan (光汉 literally "enlightening the Chinese") and began to engage in revolutionary activities to overthrow the Manchurian Qing rule. This essay deals with the concept of class (*jieji* 阶级) in his writings.

I. THE "CLASS SYSTEM"

In Chinese, the word *jieji* originally referred to the hierarchical order of social relations in Confucian ethics and was often used to describe the difference in status between members of society as well as in the ranks and titles of officials.¹ The first to use the word as a translation of "class" probably was Liang Qichao (1873-1929) (Jin & Liu, 2009: 606). In 1899,

while in Japan, Liang wrote: "In Europe it is common to distinguish people by class, but not in China" (Ren, 1899). Consequently, he refused to employ this term in reference to China's problems. At the beginning of the 20th century, after Chinese intellectuals had come into contact with socialist theories, a debate on the applicability of these theories on China erupted and the concept of "class" was widely used in these debates. Among the anti-Manchu revolutionaries, "class" was used to refer to the Manchu rulers (Dawo, 1903). The widespread use of "class" to discuss China's systemic problems is related to the Russo-Japanese War. In 1904, calling for opposition against Russia and safeguarding "national sovereignty", the revolutionary journal *Jingzhong Ribao* (警钟日报) published Liu's essay *On China's class system* (*Lun Zhongguo Jiejie Zhidu* 论中国阶级制度). In it, Liu opposed Liang's argument that "China had no classes" and pointed out that traditional Chinese society was no different from the West, that all were "class systems" (*jiejie zhidu* 阶级制度); "class systems" were an "unavoidable stage of barbaric societies" and existed in all Western countries as well as in China, although they ran counter to the "general rule" of social progress (Shen, 1904). Liu wanted to use the concept of "class" to describe the separation into high and low status among people and ethnicities, highlighting the inequality in the relations between Manchu and Han, and expose "class" as a man-made, not preordained or God-given category.

In the year before publishing "On China's class system", after having failed in the imperial examination system, Liu expressed his opposition to the current rulers by starting to author a series of anti-Manchu texts. In 1903, influenced by Rousseau's idea in "The Social Contract" that only the people can constitute the sovereign, Liu wrote *Rang Shu* (攘书); in 1904, together with the anti-Manchu activist Lin Baishui (林白水, 1874-1926), he wrote "Essentials of the Chinese social contract" (*Zhongguo Minyue Jingyi* 中国民约精义); in 1905, he wrote "A study of the origin of ancient political thought – 6: On the origin of class" (*Guzheng Yuanshi Lun, Jiejie Yuanshi Lun Diliu* 古政原始论·阶级原始论第六) and *Textbook on Ethics* (*Lunli Jiaokeshu* 伦理教科书). In all these texts, there were arguments on "class" and the "class system" destined to reveal unequal social structures; the main purpose always was to find a basis for an ethnic revolution overturning Manchu rule.

Between 1905 and 1907, in the great debate on revolution and reform

that unfolded in the journals *Min Bao* (民报) and *Xinmin Congbao* (新民丛报), “class” was used extensively by the revolutionaries, not only to refer to the institutions of aristocracy, to all kinds of structural divisions within different societies, and to the different groups related to economic production in the capitalist era in the history of the West, but also to describe the history and contemporary reality of China. While Liu’s understanding of “class” as resulting from relations of production deepened continually, Liang consciously kept a distance from this concept (Naoki, 2009: 217).

II. INEQUALITY AND ANARCHIST REVOLUTION

In February 1907, when the Qing government wanted to arrest Liu for his revolutionary activities, he fled with his wife He Zhen (何震, 1886-?) to Japan. There he discovered the Kōha school, whose main representatives were Kōtoku Shūsui (幸徳秋水, 1871-1911) and Sakai Toshihiko (堺利彦, 1870-1933), and endorsed their anarchistic arguments calling for “direct action” in the form of organizing general strikes and assassinations, in order to quickly realize the revolutionary goal of a stateless society. In June of the same year, his wife founded the journal *Tian Yi* (天义 *Natural Justice*) and, in the first issue, Liu published an essay entitled “On the destruction of society” (*Pohuai Shehui Lun* 破坏社会论).² Here he argued that since the founding of “society”, there had not been “a single day in which it was not a class society”; humans living in such a “society” were unable to “liberate themselves”. If one wanted to eradicate “classes”, one first had to sweep away “society” once and for all. Liu also pointed out that even in the modern “democratic countries” like France and the United States their institutions could not smooth out the class distinction between the rulers and the ruled; on the contrary, the gap between the rich and the poor became bigger and bigger. The only solution was the construction of a “new society”, which meant an equal, classless and governless society (Qufei, 1907).

How should the “destruction” of the old society be accomplished? Liu listed eleven points, the first eight of which were directed against “class”: abolish emperors and presidents, officials, nobility, parliamentarians and executives of public organizations, capitalists and people with property, soldiers and policemen, men who oppress women, and men and women

willing to be oppressed. If China wanted to carry out an ethnic, political, economic and gender revolution, it had to begin with breaking “class society” (Qufei, 1907).

Anti-militarism and public ownership were important ideas for anarchist thought, and also methods to eradicate “class”. In a text entitled “On abolishing military and property” (*Fei Bing Fei Cai Lun* 废兵废财论), Liu argued that human selfishness led to the desire to possess property, and that the unequal possession of property again and again caused wars. If military and property were not abolished, then, even if one adopted the modern systems of government from Europe and America, “the class system would secretly continue to exist within it”. Therefore, the only way to break up the unequal “class system” was to abolish the military and property, so as to completely eliminate any conflicts. In order to abolish the military and property, it was necessary to “overturn the government, eradicate borders, and make land and property publicly owned.” (Shenshu, 1907)

Liu's thought on “class” in this context was certainly different from his presentation of Rousseau's (1712-1778) view of equality in “The quintessence of the Chinese social contract”. Although Rousseau argued for economic equality, he did not advocate public ownership of all property: “[...] by equality, we should understand, not that the degrees of power and riches are to be absolutely identical for everybody; but [...] in respect of riches, no citizen shall ever be wealthy enough to buy another, and none poor enough to be forced to sell himself.” (Rousseau, 2010: 66) Rousseau thus advocated the elimination of natural inequalities by reasonable government regulations, on which Liu commented: “Equal power means that power is not identical with wealth and prestige.” (Liu, 2013: 32)

Liu affirmed the assumption of the natural equality of human beings. In a text entitled “On equalizing human ability” (*Renlei Junli Shuo* 人类均力说), he argued that “human equality” meant that every human was independent, and while enjoying rights also needed to assume duties. However, because the social nature of humans could cause inequality between people, it was necessary to use “egalitarianism” to abolish the social inequality caused by the “class system”, so that people could achieve true “independence”, “freedom”, and “equality”. These arguments were heavily influenced by Rousseau, but while Rousseau assumed that the natural equality of men did not exist in reality, Liu conceived them as a

reality to which he tried to return. In the same essay, Liu also revisited his earlier refutation of the argument devised by the Warring States agronomist Xu Xing (许行, the year of birth and death is unknown, which is roughly the same as Mencius) on the “equality of ruler and people” in “The quintessence of the Chinese social contract”. Now he argued that Xu Xing’s idea of the monarch and the people working together in fact described class-destroying anarchist behavior completely in line with the grand requirements of human equality, while Mencius’ (孟子, 385-304 or 372-289 B.C.E) theory of equal civil rights, which was similar to Rousseau’s views, was “greatly contrary to it” (Shenshu, 1907).

In “Anarchism’s view of equality” (*Wuzhengfuzhuyi Pingdeng Guan* 无政府主义平等观), Liu looked for proof of human equality in the three separate aspects of the “common origin of humankind”, the “equality of primitive people”, and the “similarities among the same species”; the reasons for inequality, in contrast, he located in “class differences”, “occupational differences”, and “the inequality between men and women”. Thus, he proposed “implementing natural human equality, destroying man-made inequalities, overturning all ruling institutions, eradicating all class and labour-dividing societies, merging all people in the world into one large community, for the complete happiness of humankind.” (Shenshu, 1907) In this context, Liu’s “class society” (*jieji shehui* 阶级社会) obviously referred to the traditional and hierarchical old order, while the “labour-dividing society” (*fenye shehui* 分业社会) referred to the modern “society” of occupational division of labour; after the eradication of classes, he envisioned the formation of an anarchic and stateless “new society”.

III. THE CARRIER OF THE “CLASS REVOLUTION”

After Liu had devised a blueprint for destroying “class society” and building a classless and completely egalitarian “new society”, he began to explore ways to implement it in China. In January 1908, *Tian Yi* published the Chinese translation of the preface of the “Communist Manifesto” and Liu commented in the endnotes to it: “The greatest contribution to history of the Manifesto is its invention of class struggle.” (Minming, 1908) In March of the same year, *Tian Yi* published the translation of the first chapter of the “Communist Manifesto” and Liu affirmed again Marx’s

theory of “class struggle”, emphasizing that all social changes throughout the ages have been caused by the “competition of classes” (Anonymous, 1908). However, the implementation of “class struggle” required a clear definition of the revolution’s subject and its object.

Liu’s perception of the subject of the Chinese revolution was inseparable from his concern for the livelihood of the Chinese people. In his view, China, which was originally based on agriculture, had gradually reduced the importance of agriculture with increasing industrialization, while modern machinery kept replacing manual labour, so that both the number of workers and peasants were decreasing, which presented a serious problem for the livelihoods of many Chinese. It was necessary to understand the situation of the peasants, who suffered repression by “capitalists”, in order to come up with solutions (Shenshu, 1907). In October 1907, Liu established a “Society for the investigation of the peasant’s suffering” (*Nongmin Jiku Diaochaui* 农民疾苦调查会), to report the current situation of the peasants and to criticize officials and capitalists (Anonymous, 1907). In March 1908, *Tian Yi* ceased publication, but in April Liu and He founded *Heng Bao* (*Equity* 衡报), in the preface of which Liu stated four purposes for the new journal: “First, overturning human rule and implementing communism; second, promoting anti-militarism and general strikes; third, recording the plight of the people; fourth, joining world labor organizations and direct action people’s parties.” (Sun Soh 申, 1908) The problem of people’s livelihood continued to be one of Liu’s main concerns.

In his essay “The Inverse Proportion of Governmental and Popular Interest” (*Lun Guojia zhi Li yu Renmin zhi Li cheng Yi Xiangfan zhi Bili* 论国家之利与人民之利成一相反之比例), Liu put forward the basic argument that the stronger the state, the greater would be the plight of the people. The interests of the state were inverse to the interests of the people (Sun Soh 申, 1908). Specifically, he used four sets of opposing relationships to demonstrate this basic point—the state and the “people” (*renmin*), the state and the “citizens” (*guomin*), the state and the “common people” (*pingmin*), and the state and the “working people” (*laomin*)—and related these four binaries to four ideas connected to modern statehood: patriotism (*aiguo zhuyi*), imperialism (*diguo zhuyi*), fatherlandism (*zuguo zhuyi*), and capitalism. It can be seen from Liu Shiwei’s argument that “the people” (*renmin*) referred to all members of a state, that were bound together by a

relationship of rights and duties; the state provided protection for the people and, in turn, required the people to have a patriotic spirit. From the anarchist's perspective, of course, this was not the true meaning of "people". The meaning of "citizens" was quite similar to "people" but referred more specifically to citizens of a modern territorial state with fixed boundaries. "Common people" was defined as the opposite of monarchs, the government, "the rich" and other such concepts. "Working people" referred to a specific group. As the state was to be abolished, the "people" and the "citizens" would vanish with it, just as the "common people" would disappear together with monarchs and governments; the "working people", however, were to undertake the task of revolution (Xu, 2018: 71).

From his investigations of past revolutions in China, Liu Shipei found a basis for his "working people's revolution"; he pointed out that the revolutions in all dynasties were initiated by the "working people's class", so China's future "great revolution" also had to be initiated by a "working people's revolution". There were three ways to unite the "working people" to form a "working people's class": associations based on shared occupations, associations based on shared regional provenance, and secret brotherhood associations. The "working people's class" not only included all kinds of workers, peasants, and soldiers, but also members of secret societies "partly belonging to the working people"; their common trait was that they all relied on their own labor to obtain means of living (Anonymous, 1908). Although Liu believed that it was difficult for China's "upper society" to unite, the "society of the rich" and the "capitalist class" were the targets of the revolution. He believed that the expansion of the "capitalist class" in China was inevitable, leading to the exploitation of the working people and the monopolization of all benefits by this class. Therefore, Liu wrote, resisting the "capitalist class" was "what my party must engage in" (Anonymous, 1908).

Although he had high hopes for the "working people's" resistance to the "capitalist class", based on the investigation of the living conditions of peasants in Shandong, Sichuan, Guizhou and other places in China, he found an additional subject for an anarchist communist revolution: peasants. In order to demonstrate the relationship between the anarchist revolution and the peasant revolution, *Heng Bao* published its seventh issue in June 1908 as a "Peasant issue", specifically discussing the situation of Chinese peasants and the reality and future of the peasant revolution (Wan,

2003: 159). In the article “Anarchist Revolution and Peasant Revolution” (*Wuzhengfu Geming yu Nongmin Geming* 无政府革命与农民革命), Liu pointed out that, if one wanted to implement anarchist revolution, one had to start with a peasant revolution. Regarding the specific methods of the peasant revolution, he put forward two suggestions, namely, tax resistance and anti-government, anti-“landlord” (*tianzhu* 田主) action. If peasants wanted to make revolution to become independent and get rid of poverty, they had to liberate themselves from economic dependence on “landlords” and the “capitalist class” (Anonymous, 1908). The “landlords” here were the source of all evil, forming an unequal master-servant relationship with the peasants, and therefore, just like the “capitalist class” mentioned above, had to become the target of revolution.

After determining the subject and object of the anarchist revolution, with “class struggle” as the mainstay, Liu proposed the concept of implementing a joint agricultural and industrial system in China, saying that this was the only policy to defeat and eliminate “capitalists”. He envisioned that if the boundary between agriculture and industry were eliminated, all the means of industrial production and agricultural production would end up in the hands of the workers. “Accumulating common capital and using common labor force”, all products would be common property of the workers. The “capitalist class” of the employers would transform into workers, so that all would benefit from the fruits of common labor, and the class relationships between employers and employed workers and farmers would disappear. Eventually, what Kropotkin had called the “happiness of all humans”, would be realized in China (Anonymous, 1908).

CONCLUSION

In summary, when Liu Shipai discussed the social reorganization of modern China, he first put “class” into a narrative about China’s society and ethics, but later brought “class” into the context of race, ethnic, gender, economic, and military revolutions. His understanding of “class”, on the one hand, was formed by the traditional meaning of relations between upper and lower social spheres in imperial China, and, on the other hand, referred to the Western concept of “social classes”, that is, the inequality existing between different layers of society; additionally, it also reflected all kinds of inequalities. Liu not only obtained theoretical

inspirations from traditional Chinese egalitarian thought, Rousseau's view on equality, and anarchism's "perfect equality", but also from the propaganda of Japanese anarchists and socialists, as well as from parts of the *Communist Manifesto*. Although his concept of "class" clearly underwent some changes over time, it already came close to the Marxist understanding of the term, even though this is not very clear in his mode of expression.

Despite anarchism's confusion over the social revolution, that was caused by a conceiving a cultural revolution to change social activities, Marxism emphasized first and foremost a redistribution of power, the key to which was to change class relations. In Liu's theoretical construction of anarchism, "class" was a very important concept in his discussion of the reorganization of modern Chinese society. At first, he used the concept of "class" to criticize Chinese traditional and stratified society and advocated the abolishment of "class" to achieve absolute equality between people. However, with the continuous construction and development of his theory of revolution, and especially after coming into contact with the Marxist theory of "class struggle", he seemed to quickly understand the key point of changing class relations. On the one hand, he insisted on the abolition of the various inequalities represented by "class", and on the other hand, he used "class" as a tool to "unify" the subject of the revolution in his successive proposals of syndicalist anarchist revolution and anarchist communist revolution. However, the evolution of Liu's ideas on revolution was finally stopped by the forced suspension of the *Tian Yi* and *Heng Bao* journals (Xu, 2018: 75).

In November 1908, after Liu and He had returned to China, they formally joined the cause of the Qing Dynasty and acted as assistants to the governor of Sichuan, Duan Fang, betraying their former revolutionary comrades.³ Their previous passionate propaganda for anarchism in Tokyo then merely seemed to be an error of the past.

Notes

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¹ See Liu (2002: 408).

² It was signed by the pseudonym Qufei Zi (去非子), but nonetheless it can be inferred that it was written by Liu Shipai.

³ See Wan (2003: 138-145).

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