

Translingual Encounters: Freedom, Civic Virtue, and the Social Organism in Liang Qichao's Reading of Kant

TRANSIT Vol. 13, No. 1

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Around the turn of the twentieth century, Chinese political theorist Liang Qichao (1873-1929)¹ attended a Philosophy Ceremony (哲學祭) at the Temple of Philosophy in Tokyo.² This daily ritual honored the Four Sages of world philosophy: the Buddha (Sakyamuni), Confucius, Socrates, and Immanuel Kant.³ In the ritual, the figure of Kant exists in a syncretic setting, which flattens time, space, and tradition and gestures towards a form of humanitarian universalism. The ritual establishes cross-cultural equivalences in the figure of these Four Sages while retaining the particularity of ancestor worship in Japan and China. In this way, the scene performs the invention of meaning within a local context that occurs in the translation of concepts; a process that Lydia Liu terms “translingual practice” (Liu 26).

Following this initial encounter, Liang transformed the ritual's material representation of Kant into a specifically textual one through writings that creatively appropriated Kant in the Chinese context. Liang published serialized articles entitled “The Theory of Kant, the Greatest Modern Philosopher” (近世第一大哲康德之學說)⁴ in the *New Citizen's Journal* (新民叢報) in 1903-1904 and introduced Chinese readers to Kant

¹ Liang Qichao, his teacher Kang Youwei (1858-1927), and several other prominent intellectuals like Tan Sitong (1865-1898), were chief agitators behind the “1898 Hundred Days Reform” (*wuxu* reforms 戊戌變法), a short-lived series of policy initiatives under the Guangxu Emperor (1871–1908) of China's last imperial dynasty, the Qing (1644-1912). These reforms sought to modernize the Chinese military, develop state-sponsored mercantile industrial and infrastructural facilities, establish Western-style research universities, and build a “modern” education system, all with the goal of strengthening China against increasing imperial incursions by European nations, the US, and Japan. A coup-d'état led by Guangxu's mother, the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908), ended the “Hundred Days Reform.” With a warrant issued for his arrest and execution, Liang fled to Japan where he joined other Chinese students and political exiles and learned to read Japanese (Leveson 26-32, Zarrow 15-18).

² As Max Ko-W'o Huang notes, this temple was founded by Inoue Enryo (1858-1919), a famous Japanese educator, philosopher, Buddhist reformer and pro-imperial ideologue during the Meiji Era. He was a major figure in the reception and transmission of Western Philosophy in Japan and was also the founder of Tokyo University. The Philosophy Ceremony was part of his mission to “bring philosophy to the people” (132).

³ The description of this anecdote is how Liang begins his article on Kant (YBSWJ, v2, p1).

⁴ Following other scholars, this paper will cite this essay from the collection of Liang's writing using the abbreviation “YBSWJ pp.” from: Liang, Qichao. *Yinbing Shi Wenji Quanbian (Collected writings from the Ice-Drinker's Studio, Essays)*. Vol. 2, Xin Min Shu Ju, 1935. [Note: Liang's article was originally published in *Xinmin congbao* (新民叢報), issues 25, 26, 28 (1903) and 46-48 (1904).]

for the first time.⁵ Possibly because Kant was neither frequently named in Liang's subsequent work nor often cited by Chinese revolutionaries in the early-mid 20th-century,⁶ the relationship between Kant and late-Qing and early Republican thought has been understudied.

This paper argues that Liang's rendering of Kant performs a double transformation: first, Liang reformulates the Kantian autonomous moral subject to make it conform with Neo-Confucian ideals of virtuous self-cultivation. Through his translation and commentary, Liang shifts the foundation of Kant's conception of the "freedom of the will" away from the requirements of pure reason and towards Wang Yangming's (1472-1529) Neo-Confucian notion of man's "innate knowledge of the good" (*liangzhi* 良知). Second, Liang engages in a gradualist transformation of neo-Confucian thought that brings it closer to liberalism by making the individual the seat of moral agency. Liang then uses this syncretic formulation of the individual subject's agentive capacity to encourage the moral cultivation of "the people," represented through the metaphor of the social organism. The organic unity of nation-state and "the people" grounds reciprocal duties in each: citizens are obligated to exhibit "civic virtue" through active participation in the construction of the nation-state, and the state must invest in the active cultivation of the people's agentive capacities. While the organismic metaphor is present in Kant, Liang's article shows how it can be mobilized to open up the political stakes of individual moral agency.

Liang's interpretation participated in the production of what I call 'peripheral liberalism.'⁷ Through merging and comparing different traditions, Liang's article on Kant exhibited how Chinese thinkers were not passive recipients that merely 'responded' to the importation of Western liberalism. Liang actively produced a political theory—a 'peripheral liberalism'—that reread the central tenants of liberalism regarding the moral autonomy of the subject in order to mobilize those ideas as part of a pro-republican, anti-imperial nationalist politics in Qing China.

Liang's Encounter with Kant and Translingual Practice

The historical context for Liang's articles on Kant consisted of complex, international networks of institutional affiliations, the circulation of texts and publications, the movement (and flight) of scholars and political agitators, and the global circulation of discourses on progress and civilization that often took 'the West' as a signifier for 'modern' (Duara; Huang 131-133). Specifically, Liang's "The Theory of Kant, the Greatest Modern Philosopher" was enabled by a chain of translations and interpretations traversing four languages: Liang translated the piece from Nakae Chōmin's (1847-1901) Japanese article

⁵ Liang served as the chief editor of the *New Citizen Journal*, which published 96 issues, circulated for five years before being shut down in 1907, and whose readership could have reached as high as 200,000 (Levenson 68-69; Phillip Huang 5-7; 99; Chang 133).

⁶ The relationship between Kant and modern Chinese thought more broadly (especially new Confucianism) is, however, a vast field. Previous studies tend to center upon Xiong Shili (1885-1968), Mou Zongsan (1909–1995) and Mou's intellectual descendants. Cf. Lowe.

⁷ The term "peripheral" here is not meant to invoke the world-systems schema of Immanuel Wallerstein and other Marxian scholars. Instead, this paper uses the term "peripheral" to more colloquially designate that spatial and temporal position of Liang and other late-Qing Chinese thinkers who were reading liberalism outside of the context in which those ideas were initially developed, being "imported" into China via various translingual practices.

Rigaku enkaku shi (1886), a fairly direct translation from the French of selections from Alfred Jules Émile Fouillée's (1838-1912) *Histoire de la philosophie* (1875) (Huang 130). Fouillée does not translate Kant's works, but rather explains Kant's major political, ethical, epistemological, and metaphysical arguments. By translating Liang into English, this paper thus adds a fifth link in the history of translations relating to Liang's article. The article was therefore not a direct translation of Kant, but rather a presentation of Kantian principles in which Liang interprets, modifies, and critiques Kant in both implicit and explicit ways.

In studying the transmission of thought, this paper seeks to avoid inadvertently treating Kant's texts as 'origin' and therefore as a site of authority against which other interpretations can be judged as either faithful or deficient.⁸ This task is of particular importance in dealing with ideas and texts that traveled from Europe to Asia in an imperial and colonial context because of the history of Orientalist discourses that produced and entrenched an East-West binary. Addressing this problematic in China during the early 20th century, Lydia Liu proposes focusing on "translingual practices," which refer to various rhetorical strategies and discursive forms including summary, paraphrasing, appropriation, invention of neologisms, and *translation* both strictly and broadly defined (26-7). This approach avoids Eurocentric representations of 'Western dominance' and 'Chinese response,' where European texts are treated as origin and non-European translations as recipients. Liu writes:

The study of translingual practice examines the process by which new words, meanings, discourses, and modes of representation arise, circulate, and acquire legitimacy within the host language due to, or in spite of, the latter's contact/collision with the guest language. Meanings, therefore, are not so much "transformed" when concepts pass from the guest language to the host language as invented within the local environment of the latter. (26)

"Translingual practice" moves beyond basic questions of whether equivalences between languages are possible and instead asks: what are the conditions of possibility for making hypothetical equivalencies in the first place?

Since a given word from the guest language can often be translated (or transliterated phonetically) into the host language in different ways, any given "trope of equivalence" between languages is open to contestation and change.⁹ Thus, it is only through the historical processes of repeated use, the travel of texts and people, and

⁸As Jacques Derrida demonstrates in his account of "*différance*," the movement of the trace, and "iterability," such an approach would be guilty of searching for a stable foundation of meaning within Kant's text that any writing cannot provide. Building upon the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, Derrida argues that because the sign's identity is produced out of pure difference, each sign carries within it the "trace" of all other signs to which it is not identical (ex: "cat" immediately refers to the signified content of dog, sheep, etc. as well as signifiers of mat, rat, carrying through to all signs of the English language). This movement of the trace means that the identity of a sign is always "differed" both spatially and temporally—what Derrida calls *différance*. The identity of signs is *spatially* deferred in its production from its synchronic difference with all other signs in a given language at a particular moment in time, but it is also *temporally* deferred in the trace's diachronic reference to past significations as well as yet unknown future significations. One implication of the trace's movement is that the author's "original intent" cannot hold the ultimate authority over a work. Meaning inherently and necessarily exceeds any attempt to arrest it at one point in time. See *Of Grammatology*, "'Structure, Sign and Play'" and "Des Tours De Babel."

⁹ See Liu's critique of terms like "source" and "target" language in *Translingual Practice*, pp. 20-7.

institutional legitimation (such as official translation bureaus or bilingual dictionaries), that these “hypothetical equivalences” are established and persist (16-17). Translations, therefore, are not “neutral event[s] untouched by contending interests” but are a “site of struggle” where the “guest language is forced to encounter the host language.” The ensuing contestation over the languages’ “irreducible differences” is what creates the possibility for “new words and meanings [to] emerge in the host language itself” (26). This process does not imply a continual subservience of the host language to the guest language in which it remains dependent on the latter as its ultimate referent or ground. Rather, it is the host language that fully determines the translation’s “new meanings in its new historico-linguistic environment.” Every translation thereby opens up the guest language to contamination by the host language as the “assumed meanings” of a text are “intercepted by the unintended audiences” who subject them to “unexpected readings and appropriations in the context of the host language” (60).

In the case of Liang’s presentation of Kant, these translingual practices include (but are not limited to) the transmission of Kant’s ideas through summaries and translations, the geopolitical and ideological context of 19th-century imperialism that made the translation of ‘Western’ philosophy into Japanese and Chinese appear as a necessary and urgent task, the negotiation of pre-existing philosophical terms and neologisms, and various educational and political institutions as they related to publications and political refugees like Liang. While Liang’s articles seek to introduce readers to Kant’s philosophy, it does not remain a mere ‘copy’ of the source material. Liang actively engages in the process of transforming Kantian principles, both by translating specific terms and through explicit commentary.

Liang’s article first establishes Kant’s preeminent status in the history of Western philosophy by surveying the historical debates between rationalists and empiricists and how Kant overcame these through his contributions to metaphysics and epistemology. The first half of the article covers ideas principally from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, including the noumena/phenomena divide, the faculties of cognition, the function of reason, and the four antinomies.¹⁰ The second half of Liang’s article is dedicated to Kant’s ethical and political philosophy, with sections arguing that Kant establishes moral philosophy as the basis for philosophy in general, followed by a section on the “Relationship between Freedom, Law and Morality” (論自由與法律道德之關係). This section explains the “categorical imperative” and relates it to ideas of state sovereignty and international order in Kant’s “Theory of Perpetual Peace” (永世太平論). Liang’s article concludes with a section demonstrating how “moral philosophy can prove freedom” (申論道學可以證自由), in which he links freedom to the concept of individual responsibility and moral duties. Even though this paper is not primarily concerned with questions of accuracy in translation, I contend that “The Theory of Kant” remains an impressive article and an important

¹⁰ [Note: Unless otherwise stated, all translations of Liang into English are my own.] Liang comments that he chose not to translate the original text’s sections on religion, and also did not translate the sections on aesthetics. Liang writes that he is not translating the section on “Spirit” because the “most intense controversies about religious doctrine in the West are not of great concern to us Easterners, and moreover Kant does not issue a judgment [on the matter]” 「涉於宗教家言，泰西爭論最劇者而吾東方不甚注重。且康氏亦未下判斷。」 (YBSWJ 20).

discursive event. Large sections of Liang's piece provide the type of basic overview of Kant that one might find, for example, in an introductory textbook or encyclopedia entry.¹¹

As intellectual historian Max Ko'wu Huang notes in his close comparison between the Japanese and Chinese articles, Liang only selectively translated Nakae Chōmin's essay and inserted many of his own commentaries (*anyu* 按語). While Liang's text is rich in original comparisons between Kant and Buddhism, Confucianism, and even late-Qing thinkers,¹² the following section pursues Liang's reading of Kant alongside the neo-Confucian philosopher Wang Yangming (1472-1509).¹³ Liang's article produces new meaning as Kant's ideas pass into the Chinese context. Liang transforms Kant's conception of the freedom of the will in a way that raises the stakes of individual agency and encourages the civic virtues (*gongde* 公德) of active political participation as central to China's anti-imperialist struggle, thereby constructing an account of liberalism from the periphery.

Freedom of the Will versus Freedom of Innate Knowledge of the Good 良知之自由

The central concept linking Kant and Wang Yangming, according to Liang, is Kant's notion of the "true self" (the noumenal self as opposed to the phenomenal self), which alone possesses the capacity for acting freely. Liang systematically explains Kant's deterministic understanding of the phenomenal world, where the appearances of all things—including one's own physical body—must abide by the "principle of unavoidability" (不可避之理). This principle names the natural laws that pre-determine all phenomenal, physical things, so "everything which I do must be subject to the ordering of this general rule and I am not able to determine this" (YBSWJ 17).¹⁴ Liang writes that

¹¹ Any overview inevitably fails to express the subtleties of Kant's arguments or scholarly controversies about his arguments. Accordingly, the harshness with which various Chinese scholars have since judged Liang's article is not entirely justified, especially given its pedagogical goals as an introduction to Kant for a broad (but educated) Chinese audience. Beginning as early as the 1920's, some Chinese scholars with extensive knowledge of German philosophy have examined Liang's article, such as Wang Guowei, He Lin, Yv Yinshi and Huang Jinxing. They all criticize the article for displaying an inaccurate, fragmentary, limited or erroneous understanding of Kant, often pointing to Liang's inappropriate comparisons of Kant with Buddhism or Confucian thinkers. They also criticize the article for misappropriating Kant in order to serve Liang's own "political agenda." See Max Huang's comprehensive overview of the Chinese scholarship in "Liang Qichao and Immanuel Kant," pp. 126-129.

¹² Liang compares Kant to figures including the Song Dynasty neo-Confucians Zhu Xi (1130–1200), Zhang Zai (1020-1077), and the late-Qing activist Tan Sitong (1865-1898), who was Liang's fellow reformer during the Hundred Days period but was unable to escape from China and was executed. Max Huang and other Japanese and Chinese scholars have already taken up Liang's understanding of Buddhism and his comparison between Buddhism and Kant, so this paper will defer to their work (Huang 148-150).

¹³ By contending that Liang's comparisons between Kant and Wang Yangming reflect a genuine engagement with both the Chinese and European traditions, this paper opposes historian Joseph Levenson's assessment that Liang's writings during this period are anti-Confucian and reflect an embrace of all-out Westernization (Levenson 1-2). I argue that Liang's article on Kant does not fit Levenson's schema in which Liang's "sugar-coated" Western ideas in the authority of Confucian classics in order to make them persuasive to conservative Chinese literati.

¹⁴ 「康德又曰：吾儕肉體之生命，既與他現象同被束縛於彼所謂不可避之理、則吾之凡有所為也，必其受一公例所驅遣，而不能自肆者也。」

Kant separates the “phenomenal self” (現象之我), which is the “bodily self” (肉體之我), from the “true self” (真我).¹⁵ Only the “true self” is *not* subject to the “principle of unavoidability.” So, the existence of the “principle of freedom” (自由之理) cannot be deduced from observing the appearances of things and must have its “essence in moral philosophy” (18).¹⁶

Translating Kant’s concepts of autonomous versus heteronomous reasoning, Liang explains that for the true self to act freely, it must act on an “imperative that does not serve other ends” (無所為之命令, YBSWJ 20). Liang explains that any imperative in which there is a goal that must be satisfied through external means, such as eating in order to satisfy a hunger, is an “imperative that serves other ends” (有所為之命令).¹⁷ “As for the duties of morality,” Liang writes, “it is different from this. Everything we call a duty is without a condition” (YBSWJ 20).¹⁸ A free, moral action cannot be taken by someone with a particular goal towards which they are striving in a means-ends relationship.

Liang argues that for Kant, the “freedom of conscience” (良心之自由) is the origin of the “duties of morality” (道德之責任). Freedom of conscience, being part of the true self, “actually transcends space and exceeds time. In all of the enormous, boundless universe, not one thing can be compared to its value” (YBSWJ 21).¹⁹ By explicitly linking freedom to morality, Liang draws a clear line from Kant’s metaphysics to his ethical philosophy. In certain ways, Liang follows Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, where Kant famously remarks that “a free will and a will under moral laws is one and the same” (“Groundwork” 4:447). For Kant, freedom is not a property of the will in the sense that it accords with natural laws, because in that case it would be determined by something other than itself and would be heteronomous. Yet if freedom is to avoid being reduced to absurdity, it must be “in accordance with immutable laws” (“Groundwork” 4:447). Thus, in order for the will to be free, a rational being must act in accordance with a self-imposed law, which is the categorical imperative.²⁰ Kant explicitly argues that with regards to moral laws, “the ground of obligation here must not be sought in the nature of

¹⁵ As Huang already explains, Liang draws an explicit parallel between Kant’s “true self” and the Buddhist concept *bhūtatathatā*, meaning suchness, what things really are, or the true nature (as opposed to appearances). Liang writes: “That which Buddhism calls the “suchness” (*bhūtatathatā/zhenru* 真如) is what Kant calls the “true self” (*zhenwo* 真我), which has the character of freedom. That which [Buddhism] calls “ignorance” (*avidyā/wuming* 無明) is what Kant calls the phenomenal self (現象之我), [and] it is bounded by unavoidable principles [principles of determinism 不可避之理], which lacks the character of freedom” (YBSWJ 18-19).

¹⁶ In section “Moral philosophy as the basis for philosophy” (論道學為哲學之本) (YBSWJ 15-9).

¹⁷ These terms translate Kant’s idea of *categorical imperatives* (actions whose principle does not reference other ends) versus *hypothetical imperatives* (actions that seek to accomplish a particular end that one wills) (“Groundwork” 4:412-15): Liang: 「命令有兩種：其一曰有所為者，其他曰無所為者。譬諸語人曰：爾欲爾康強，則慎爾飲食，節爾嗜欲，此之謂有所為。蓋其命令中必含有一目的者存，意曰必如此乃足以達而目的，不然則否也。」 (YBSWJ 20).

¹⁸ 「若夫道德之責任則異是。凡曰責任云者，皆非有所為而為者也，不得以之【按語：指道德之責任】為手段而求達他之目的者也。」

¹⁹ 「然則道德之責任何為而若是其可貴耶？康德曰：道德之責任，生於良心之自由。而良心之自由，實超空間越時間，舉百千萬億大千世界，無一物可與比其價值者也。」

²⁰ Kant writes: “what, then, can freedom of the will be other than autonomous, that is, the will’s property of being a law to itself?” (“Groundwork” 4:447).

the human being... but a priori simply in concepts of pure reason” (“Groundwork” 4:389). If a free will and a will under moral law are the same, and a moral law cannot be grounded in “human nature,” then it follows that neither can freedom be grounded in human nature. Freedom must be founded *a priori* in the concept of pure reason.

Liang’s article emphasizes that freedom and the “principle of responsibility” are co-constitutive and mutually dependent. Liang tries to articulate this connection by formulating a syllogism of his own, not found in the Japanese text (Huang 136):

People who cannot be free cannot be considered responsible.

The true self (真我) has moral responsibilities.

Therefore, the true self is always free.

This is the general idea of how Kant uses the study of ethics to demonstrate the theory of freedom. (Li Ao ed, 570)²¹

This presentation of freedom is purely formal: it provides no substantial content or positive definition of what freedom *is*. The freedom of the will is a prerequisite for being held responsible, and being held responsible is necessary for making moral judgments, so people must be free because the “true self” has moral duties. This invites the question: whence moral responsibilities? For Liang, they are based in innate knowledge of the good that is proper to man’s essence, marking a clear break from Kant.²²

Liang establishes the freedom of the will’s basis not, as Kant writes, by presupposing freedom as a “property of the will of all rational beings” (“Groundwork” 4:447), but rather by presupposing the innate goodness of man and intuitive grasp of right and wrong, *liangzhi* (良知).²³ One of the key terms from the Japanese article that Liang changed was “freedom of the will” (G. *Freiheit des Willens*, J. *iyoku no jiyū*), which he renders “*liangzhi zhi ziyou*” (良知之自由), meaning “freedom of innate knowledge of the

²¹ 「故夫責任之理與自由之理，常相倚而不可離者也。以論理學明之，則其式當云：不能自由者不足以爲責任也。/ 真我者有道德之責任也。/ 故真我者常自由也。/ 此康以道學證自由說之大概也。」

²² Liang’s discussion does not, however, address the apparent paradox created by the fact that freedom of the will requires the rational agent to act in accordance with the law it gives itself (i.e. the categorical imperative) despite it being impossible to know whether that willing has any concrete effect in the world since the phenomenal realm is governed by natural laws. In other words, if our bodies and actions take place in the phenomenal world, determined by physical laws, then how could our willing “act” on the world? Kant turns to practical regulative principles—such as the perfect republican constitution, the federation of nations, or universal history—which are ideas that can never be realized in experience, but they nevertheless prescribe an end towards which nature wills human development (*Critique of Pure Reason* A3/B7, A180, and A666/B694). Practical regulative ideas help us *act* in accordance with the demands of morality because of our deficient character as finite beings; they set forth archetypes to which we can orient our actions, which will bring us closer to perfection. Liang’s text, especially the outline entitled the “Five Main Features of the Theory of Perpetual Peace,” does not present concepts like “the perfect constitution” as something that practical reason requires us to posit but cannot experience directly, and instead presents them as policy proposals (YBSWJ 25).

²³ I translate *liangzhi* as “innate knowledge of the good” in order to highlight the differences between Liang and Kant over human nature and morality. Scholars greatly disagree on the proper translation of *liangzhi*; different translations include: “intuitive knowledge,” “knowledge of the good,” “pure knowing,” “original knowledge of the good,” “innate knowledge of the good,” “innate moral knowledge,” “primordial awareness,” “conscientious consciousness,” and “innate knowledge” (Huang 134; Chang 284; Tu “Confucian Thought” 146; Wang 15).

good,”²⁴ a connotation not carried by the Japanese *iyoku no jiyū* (Huang 134).²⁵ “*Liangzhi*” is literarily comprised of *liang* (良), meaning good, virtuous or respectable, and *zhi* (知), whose meanings including: to know, perceive, comprehend, understand, or acknowledge. As a composite, *liangzhi* comes from Confucian philosopher Mencius (approx. 372-289 BC) to designate those forms of intuitive or original knowledge that constitute “true knowledge” or “pure knowing,” so *zhi* (知) here also connotes a human capacity. This knowledge is not created by man but comes from heaven (天),²⁶ which grounds his argument that human nature is fundamentally good.²⁷

Developing this strand of thinking from Mencius, the neo-Confucian thinker Wang Yangming (1472-1529) uses the term *liangzhi* to refer to a “kind of intuitive or pre-reflective knowledge of right and wrong or good and evil” (Chang 284). For Wang, the principle of man’s innate knowledge of the good (*liangzhi*) implies that the pursuit of proper moral action begins with focusing “on the intentionality of the moral agent,” which “speaks directly to the issue of man’s inner resources” (Tu x-xii). Once the mind has grasped its own intuitive knowledge, it must direct that knowledge outwards and apply it in everyday life, a process Wang calls the “extension of innate knowledge of the good” *zhi liangzhi* (致良知). By adding the word *zhi* (致), meaning “extension,”²⁸ to *liangzhi* (良知), Wang Yangming joins his theory of intuitive knowledge to moral action (Chang 284-7). This helps explain why Liang Qichao draws from Wang Yangming to translate Kant. As Hao Chang notes, “it was inconceivable for Liang that the moral imperative as ordained by the innate knowledge of the mind would not result in moral action. Action was inherent in the very moral character of the innate knowledge of the mind” (285). Liang Qichao sees a connection between Wang’s self-critical individual whose actions are oriented by proper

²⁴ Before *ziyou* (自由) was translingually fixed to *freedom, liberty, Freiheit, liberté*, etc. by Japanese translators using these Chinese characters, *ziyou* in classical Chinese literally meant to “do-as-you-will,” signifying a kind of “self-following” and “evoking strong overtones of Daoist non-action beliefs as well as a degree of heterodox libertinism” (Jenco 164). While *ziyou* captured the *positive* idea in “freedom” of “doing what one wants,” it did not relate to the *negative* definition of “freedom” in ideas of “rights” or “civil liberties” that protected the individual *against* certain government actions. The translation of “liberty” and “freedom” was greatly debated in China in the late 1800’s, but when Liang was working on Kant, *ziyou* 自由 was dominant (Huang, *The Meaning of Freedom* 88-95).

²⁵ Max Huang notes this difference along with several other “altered nouns,” but he does not pursue the philosophical implications of difference between “freedom of the will” verses *liangzhi zhi zhiyou*.

²⁶ 「人之所不學而能者，其良能也；所不慮而知者，其良知也。」 (“Mencius said, ‘What a man is able to do without having to learn it is what he can truly do; what he knows without having to reflect on it is what he truly knows,’ Mengzi 7A.15).

²⁷ *Liangzhi* highlights important differences between Mencius and Kant. While both see humans as rational beings who have the capacity and obligation to act morally, Kant does not have a view of “human nature” compatible with that of Mencius. Kant writes that just in the way that “trees in a forest, by seeking to deprive each other of air and sunlight, compel each other to find these by upward growth, so that they grow beautiful and straight,” those who “put out branches at will, in freedom and in isolation from others, grow stunted, bent and twisted” (“Idea of a Universal History” 46). For Kant, *culture* orients humans towards morality by developing a moral disposition (8:21). Humans are “cultivated” through the arts and sciences, which develop with the progression of human history (8:26). Culture cannot, however, make humans fully moral because only the perfect use of reason can ensure a morality in which everyone follows the maxim of freedom: “the warrant to obey no other external laws than those to which I could have given my consent” (“Perpetual Peace,” FN8:350). Culture helps us feel our selfish inclinations more acutely, making us readier to “subjugate the private interest (of the individual) to the public interest (of all united)” (*Anthropology* II.E.329).

²⁸ Tu Weiming employs the heterodox translation of verb *zhi* as “full realization” (“Confucian Thought” 146).

intentions and Kant's categorical imperative that bases morality on intentions rather than results.

The fact that Liang's translation grounds moral action in "innate knowledge" proper to man's nature even though Kant explicitly states that morality cannot be grounded in human nature does not mean we should simply dismiss Liang for failing to properly understand Kant. Instead, this difference brings into focus how Liang's text engages in translingual practices which produce new meaning. The shifts in words and arguments in Liang's translation allow him to mobilize Kant's political theory in the Chinese context not as a form of "instrumentalization," but as a critical practice. By linking Kant's notion of the freedom of the will to neo-Confucian concepts of moral self-cultivation in *zhi liangzhi*, Liang is able to universalize moral duties to all people and not just the Confucian literati and "sages." This move brings Kant into Liang's central project to cultivate "civic virtues" (further articulated in the 1903 essay "On Civic Virtues") which name those ethical values that create a sense of obligation for political participation. Liang writes that with the establishment of a new national ethic, all citizens would, "view national affairs as if they were their own individual concern" (Hazama 206).²⁹

Admittedly, this "new ethic" could lend itself to a form of nationalist imperialism or statism. In its call to citizens to take up national problems as their "individual concern," it could displace the needs of individuals with those of the state, thereby justifying those infringements on civil liberties often associated with nationalist and state-building projects. This paper argues, however, that Liang's concept of "civil virtue" calls upon citizens to participate in public affairs in an attempt to move the Confucian discourse on the cultivation of virtue towards a more liberal conception of the subject. In the historical context of increasingly aggressive military, economic, and territorial incursions by Japan, the US, and European powers, these "civic virtues" should be understood as part of Liang's attempt to produce a new type of subject who would engage in the anti-imperialist struggle (Karl). In his comparison between Wang and Kant, Liang mobilizes Kant's conception of the freedom of the will as a way to raise the stakes of individual agency and put further emphasis on the role of *action* in the self-reflective movement between thought and action which unites individual action with active participation in national affairs.

Rendering *Freiheit des Willens* as *Liangzhi* (良知) simultaneously decenters the faculty of reason in Kant and joins the notion of the freedom of the will to the neo-Confucian tradition of moral self-cultivation. Liang also builds a translingual connection between reason in Kant and *zhi* (知) in the neo-Confucian tradition. For Wang Yangming, the process of universalizing moral self-cultivation is a "way of being human" for all people, not just the Confucian elite. His conception of self-cultivation, however, is an interiorized process of reflection that explicitly resists formulation in norms or laws. "Sagehood" is a standard of inspiration for others, but not an imperative to act in a particular way. Using Kant in this way, Liang aims to democratize the possibility of moral cultivation and detach it from Confucian notions of "sagehood." Kant thereby provides a supplement to Liang's other writings around this period, especially to his 1904 article "On Personal Virtue" (論私德).³⁰ Here, Liang argues that the self-cultivation of personal virtue

²⁹ Hazama's translation of Liang's "On Civil Virtue," page 14, published in *Xinmin Shuo* ("Discourses on the New Citizen" 1903).

³⁰ Published in the 18th section of *Xinmin Shuo* in the *New Citizen's Journal* (38-39) (Hazama 212).

brings the “lesser self” (小我) into alignment with the “greater self” (大我) by allowing one to reconsider one’s own hidden self-interest in favor of the general good (Hazama 218-9). Liang fought against the tendency in the historical interpretations of Wang Yangming to turn towards self-contemplation while neglecting the injunction to *act*, which Liang saw as central to Wang’s concept of “extension of knowledge,” *zhi liangzhi*.³¹ Doing so positions Kant’s clear articulation of the relationship between autonomous moral reasoning, the freedom of the will, and action as a support to Liang’s project of establishing a new practical foundation for civic virtue. It is clear that in the course of the above-described translingual practice, the “assumed meaning” of Kant was radically displaced: “unintended audiences,” first in Japan and then China, interpreted Kant in unexpected ways in unanticipated contexts.³²

Liang’s reading of Wang Yangming alongside Kant did not appraise the past in a conservative way, but constituted part of Liang’s modernizing, state-building project. Indeed, starting from the Ming-Qing transition (mid-1600’s), the intellectual mainstream in China had turned away from Wang Yangming, arguing that his inward contemplation led to concerns over abstractions that distracted scholars from practical statesmanship and contributed to the fall of the Ming dynasty (Schwartz 6-7). Liang’s rehabilitation of Wang to provide a foundation for a new, modern citizenry was therefore quite revolutionary. Drawing on Japanese scholarship and using the Meiji state as one of his prime models for China, Liang looked to Wang as a way to articulate a practice of civic virtue that could link the individual to the nation-state (Chang 287-88). As Hazama Naoki demonstrates, Liang’s reappraisal of Wang’s thought, especially concerning the connection of “personal” to “civic” virtue, was in no small part due to the rise of “Wang Studies” (J. *Yōmeigaku* 陽明学) in Japan during the late 1880’s and 1890’s (215). Responding to the ‘Westernization’ of the immediate post-Restoration period, a growing number of Japanese intellectuals sought to reestablish modernization on explicitly Japanese traditionalist grounds—which involved the exaltation of Wang Yangming/Yōme as foundational to a nationalist morality of the citizen.

One such scholar was Inoue Tetsujiro (1856-1944), professor of philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University, whose work greatly influenced Liang Qichao. Inoue argued that traditional Japanese and Western values needed to be broken apart and blended back together in a single “morality for the future” (Hazama 217). This new morality would overcome the moral “chaos” of the present and connect the “domain of the personal” to

³¹ Liang Qichao argues that many interpretations of Wang mistakenly emphasize Wang’s other major idea, *zhixing heyi*, the “unity of knowledge and action” (知行合一) (Chang 284-7). In the “unity of knowledge and action,” the moral agent engages in a process of self-criticism, endlessly circling from an analysis of one’s inner knowledge to a reflection on the actions which result from that knowledge and back to a reflection on one’s inner knowledge as part of a “dynamic process of self-cultivation” (*Neo-Confucian Thought in Action* 173-5). Liang argues that in this “unity of knowledge and action,” the primacy is on *action* as established by *zhi liangzhi* (extension of intuitive knowledge of the good), making the “unity of knowledge and action” a supplement to *zhi liangzhi* (Chang 285).

³² Here I echo Lydia Liu’s analysis of the translation of *Chinese Characteristics* (1889) into Chinese. Written by Christian missionary Arthur Smith, *Chinese Characteristics* propagated Western narratives about Chinese people that then influenced Chinese modernist literature. Liu writes: “In the course of translingual practice, the assumed meanings of Smith’s text were thus intercepted by the unintended audiences (first Japanese and then Chinese) who subjected them to unexpected readings and appropriation in the context of the host language” (60).

that of “the civil—that is, to the state.” For Inoue, some “Eastern” elements worthy of preservation were Wang Yangming’s/Yōmei’s ideas on individual ethical cultivation. Another Meiji-era scholar, Yoshimoto Jō (Tekka shoin), argued that since the individual is the basic unit upon which the state is organized, the moral cultivation of the citizen is essential to the “nation’s vigor.” For both Japanese scholars, Wang Studies/ Yōmeigaku could serve as the “foundation for the national citizen’s morality” (Hazama 216-8).³³ Mediated through these Japanese studies, Liang’s comparison between Wang and Kant likewise cannot be reduced to a form of traditionalism or culturalism that uses a synthetic method to demonstrate Chinese equivalence (or superiority) to Western thought. Rather, Liang’s use of his ‘native’ tradition was already a translingual practice of re-appropriating Wang from Meiji-era Japan.

The Social Organism in Kant and Liang

Since “freedom of the will” as “freedom of innate knowledge of the good” forms the foundation for Liang’s new syncretic conception of civic virtue, an important question is how Liang conceives of the ‘nation’ or the ‘society’ in which the individual participates. Kant was famously not an advocate of democracy, but in the “three maxims”(格言) of Kant, i.e. the three formulations of the categorical imperative, Liang sees a powerful foundation for democracy, popular sovereignty, and unity of the people. Liang writes that Kant’s ethics should be used to establish a “democratic country of freedom and good intention”: “When individuals all mutually take others’ actions as ends and no one takes them as means,” what is created can be called a “democratic country of united goals.” In this “democratic country,” Liang’s rendering of Kant’s “kingdom of ends,” there is “mutual respect for every person; there is no one taking advantage of each other.” Liang describes this as “Rousseau’s idea that ‘each person altogether establishes a constitution’ and all abide by the law” such that “each person is a ruler [and] each person is a subject” (YBSWJ 23).³⁴ These united ends cannot be disassociated from the need to “advance the knowledge and morality of the people” (26). Citizens have a moral duty to the state, but the state also has the duty to positively develop citizens’ capacity for moral action.

Even though Liang highlights what he sees as some affinities between Kant’s categorical imperative and Rousseau’s social contract, his brief comparison obscures an important discontinuity between the two in which he sides with Kant. Specifically, Rousseau’s social contract maintains a mechanistic view of the social body, whereas Liang sees the concept of “the general will” as something like a substance that binds the social organism together into a totality, thereby undoing the hierarchy of “ruler” and “ruled.”³⁵ Liang treats this unity of the people as an organic whole in which the principle of freedom of the individual is identical to the principle of freedom of the state. Liang makes this position clear in an extended commentary (also not in the Japanese):

³³ Hazama cites the work of Ogyū Shigehiro in making this claim.

³⁴ 「故康德推論道學之極，則謂宜合全世界以建設一“自由的善意之民主國”。夫然，故各人皆互以他人之行為為目的，而莫或以為手段，若是者亦名之曰“眾目的之民主國”。眾目的之民主國，各人有互相崇重，無互相利用者也。即盧梭所謂人人皆立法者，皆守法者，人人皆君主皆臣從也。」

³⁵ For a discussion of the mechanistic versus organismic conceptions of society, see Pheng Cheah’s *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation*, pp. 28-33.

On the whole, Kant's theory of innate moral knowledge and the main points of statist's theory (國家論) on the doctrine of sovereignty are very much the same. Sovereignty (主權) is absolute; there is nothing above it. It orders and does not receive orders. All of the people's freedom has this as its source. All of the people's freedom is within the scope that the power of the sovereignty of the nation-state bestows, and so [the people] cannot but obey sovereignty. Conscience (良心) is also like this. It is absolute; it is supreme. It is an imperative (命令). The principle of the right of our freedom can be established because of conscience and because of the true self (真我), therefore it cannot but obey conscience and obey the true self. Obedience to sovereignty is where the duties of an individual (個人) with regards to the nation appears; Obedience to conscience (良心) is then where the duty of my physical body with regards to the true self appears. (YBSWJ 21)³⁶

The "freedom of the will" requires acting in accordance with the moral law which the will sets for itself, and the freedom of citizens requires following the laws of the state which are both the result and cause of the citizens' freedom (Cheah 28-33). Contrary to Chenchen Zhang's claim that in Liang's understanding of the nation, "the ontological analogy between the sovereign state and the autonomous individual is absent" (Zhang 350), Liang indeed sees the sovereignty of the nation-state as isomorphic with the "freedom of conscience" — both are absolute and command supreme obedience. One might ask of the above passage: what happens when the commands of the state run contrary to those of the individual's conscience? How can one and the same individual both obey the state and obey their own conscience absolutely? Liang appears to miss the possibility of this contradiction as a consequence of his view of the state as an organismic figure embodying a national people.

As Liang makes clear, freedom is not intelligible outside of the context in which a people are already the people *of* a nation-state. Freedom is not a property of the people prior to the nation-state, as it is for the social contract theorists, but actually has its grounds in the formation of the nation-state. The nation, however, also does not exist prior to the national self-consciousness of the people and their dedicated (even self-sacrificing) participatory action to build it. Neither the nation nor the people are ontologically prior; they generate one another in an organic whole, thereby undoing the hierarchy of ruler and ruled.

Max Huang claims that the notion of the social organism comes from Liang's own political concerns and is not what Kant intended.³⁷ It is true that Liang learned of evolutionary theory and social Darwinism as early as 1896 when he read the not-yet published draft of Yan Fu's (1854-1921) translation of Thomas Henry Huxley's *Evolution*

³⁶ 「康德所說自由界說甚精嚴,其梗概已略具前節,即以自由之發源全歸於良心(即真我)是也。大抵康氏良心說與國家論者之主權說絕相類。主權者,絕對者也,無上者也,命令的而非受命的者也。凡人民之自由,皆以是為原泉,人民皆自由於國家主權所賦與之自由範圍內,而不可不服從主權。良心亦然。為絕對的,為無上的,為命令的。吾人自由之權理所以能成立者,恃良心故,恃真我故,故不可不服從良心,服從真我。服從主權,則個人對於國家之責任所從出也;服從良心,則軀殼之我對於真我之責任所從出也。」

³⁷ Huang writes, "Liang projected Yan Fu's (1854-1921) interpretation of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) onto Nakae's portrayal of Kant's thought" ("Liang Qichao and Immanuel Kant" 141).

and Ethics.³⁸ This does not mean, however, that Liang “projected” organicism onto Kant. As Pheng Cheah’s scholarship on organismic vitalism in German Idealism demonstrates, Kant actually articulates one of the most important versions of the organismic metaphor. Cheah argues that Kant “was the first to link the realization of freedom to organic life understood as a spontaneous auto-causal process sharply distinguished from human artifice” and that “the *Critique of Judgment* contains the first modern formulation of the organismic metaphor of the political body”(64).³⁹ Liang connects Kant’s theory of moral autonomy to the statist theories of sovereignty through the organismic figure of a national people, an interpretation grounded in Kant’s text.

Conclusion

Translingual encounters between texts, thinkers, and ideas enable unexpected interpretations and appropriations that overcome the “original/copy” paradigm. This paper has therefore focused on the *generativity* of the translingual encounter between Liang and Kant in which Liang’s texts performs a double transformation: First, by translating Kant’s *Freiheit des Willens* [“freedom of the will”] using Wang Yangming’s notion of *liangzhi* [“innate knowledge of the good”], Liang shifts the foundation of Kant’s notion of freedom away from reason towards the cultivation of virtue. This transformation enables the second move in which Liang subtly modifies neo-Confucian ethics in a way that centers individual moral autonomy and reformulates the relationship between the individual and the nation-state through the organismic metaphor of the national body. Liang mobilizes these two transformations as part of a broader political project to produce a new kind of Chinese citizen who would actively participate in constructing the nation-state, contributing to China’s strength and sovereignty in the face of imperialist powers. Future scholarship could therefore put Liang’s interpretation of Kant in conversation with other liberal or left democratic figures in the 20th century, such as Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas, who also turned to Kant to open up the stakes of individual agency and political participation. Liang’s selective and creative appropriation of Kant produces an alternative formulation of liberalism from the periphery that must be incorporated into the global history of liberalism itself.

³⁸ Translated as “On Evolution” (*Tianyan lun* 天演論), published 1896-1898 (Chang).

³⁹ For a fuller discussion of Kant and the organismic metaphor, see chapters 1-2 of *Spectral Nationality*.

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