

Li Dazhao's Conception of Modern State Before the New Culture Movement*

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Based on the following two points that one is the social disorder resulted from the “republic” since the Revolution of 1911 and the other is constant reflection on the recognition of the political values of western political parties, Li Dazhao places his hope on awakening and strength of the people to deal with the gap between republican political ideal and social reality of the Republic of China finally. This kind of emphasis and expectation on the power of people makes up a key factor assisting Li Dazhao's early conversion to Marxism.

Keywords: Li Dazhao, conception of the state, political party, the common people

Domestic academic researches on Li Dazhao, a pioneer of the Communist Movement in China, focus on his role in the early spread of Marxism and the establishment of the Communist Party of China (the related representatives are followed: Wang & Wu, 2022; Hou, 2021; Du, 2022), while little attention is paid to his concept of state before he gets in touch with Marxism. In view of the situation, this article will focus on Li Dazhao's vision of a modern China before the New Culture Movement. In Li's opinion, although the Revolution of 1911 achieved recovery and established the Republic of China, it caused a lot of bad influences, that both social ethos and people's thoughts were going from bad to worse, politics were filled with quarrel and fraudulence, corruption was rampant, officials were neglectful of their duties and conscienceless, and the society was full of bullying. Just like Li said, “China has a history of more than 4,000 years, and the society has never been too dark today” (Li, 2013a, p. 82). The republican society full of people's bright hope was not been achieved at all, but it went from bad to worse with the depressed society and the indignant people. The life of ordinary people became more embarrassed. With the feudal dynasty been overthrown, the republican order was not really been established; the political disunity and chaotic operation of power were highlighted. Based on this, Li believed that it's urgent to abolish governor and unify military and government to build a new country.

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Pursue a Unified Political System

The administrative districts of provinces and counties should be divided for convenience of government based on the differences in geography and humanities, and then Li believed that land was still the land of country and people were still nationals of the country; they could not be regarded as private property of provinces. This view from Li is not uncommon today, but consisting of a serious problem in early years of the Republic of China. All provinces became independent from the Qing Dynasty after the revolution; their governors who were mostly from the old bureaucrats controlled local military and political power. After the establishment of the Republic of China, they maintained an army and defied orders from the central government. Governors opposed the Central Committee in the name of "supporting civil rights", and coerced people in the name of "respecting national law". In fact, they made use of national law and civil rights to suppress and resist it, making the central government and people helpless (Li, 2013b, p. 8).

Autocratic monarch was the great threat of state before the revolution; however, there produced dozens of autocratic governors after it. They combined political power, financial power, and military power, and seemed to be the federal autocratic monarch more harmful. They were arrogant, independent of law, and did everything in their own; even the military and financial affairs relating to the rise and fall of country cannot be coordinated because of their own private interests. They did borrow and tax at will without any rules. Someone described them "plunder people's flesh and blood to fat themselves, cut people's cream to help them that making the financial source in chaos". Because the governors were in charge of the finance completely, the national tax officials sent by central government were dismissed finally. The national finance was so restricted that central government's decrees cannot go out of the capital; local separatist regimes divided their territory and defended it. The boundaries of each region were as clear as hostile countries with the whole country were nearly divided and people were put to death. It can be seen that the national power could not be wakened and the civil rights could not be extended with the existence of governors (Li, 2013c, pp. 60-62).

In Li's opinion, there was no tradition in Chinese history that the governor dominated the place. Although China had long been autocratic by imperial power, it did not go deep into local areas, and then formed a fact of civilian politics. The situation was different in the Republic of China. Because of the existence of governors, who "rely on their power making people restless", the former civilian life with freedom and peace was gone (Li, 2013c, p. 62). The Constitution formulated by the Republic of China paid too much attention to central autocracy that ignored the true unconstitutional person was not the president and the central rather than the governor and the local (Li, 2013c, p. 61). What's worse, some schemers deluded people with the modern theory of decentralization regardless of China's reality. There must be one result that the governor would monopolize political power and local people would have no right to share it if we implemented decentralization at that time, "it's the governor who shares the power instead of decentralization!" (Li, 2013c, p. 62) Based on these reasons, it's unrealistic to experiment federalism in China; Li believed that it's time to remove governor from their office by vigorous means on the date of the promulgation of the Constitution and the establishment of the formal government to establish the foundation for long-term stability of the country. It would be treated as rebel when the governor resisted orders and refused to release his troops, and we would send troops to fight him decisively. China would be confronted with the following situations: constant political vicissitude, unceasing fight, disrespected constitution, and be fell into split in struggle for power and profit when we treated separatist with yield attitude and the state power could not be administrated at the time of the founding of the Republic of China (Li, 2013c, p. 63).

After the abolition of the governor, Li believed that we should build a politically unified country. It's the central government to send personnel to take over the army, then general power would be directly under control of the central government, and political power would be attributed to local civil affairs officers. Breaking regional barriers, all provincial governors should be appointed by central government that would realize the actual domination of central government over local areas (Li, 2013c, p. 64). Having unified use of power to promote or demote staff, the central government could work hard to revitalize the country. As for provincial system, Li thought it was just a result of China's historical development, not an unchangeable strategy for management, which can be seen from the fact that it changed into a separatist regime when came to the Republic of China. In order to consolidate the foundation of unity and eliminate the hidden danger of division completely, Li further envisaged to abolish this provincial system at the same time when the governor was abolished, which would be replaced by a smaller administrative unit "Dao" (Li, 2013c, p. 65). Li specially emphasized to separate administrative region and military according to needs of geography and humanity when the governor was abolished to consolidate the foundation of political unity. The commander in chief of the military region should be appointed by central government and the military forces in this region could not interfere in civil affairs; all of these could prevent the regime from being overwhelmed by military power and repeating the pattern of warlord separatism (Li, 2013c, pp. 65-66).

During this period, Li's thought of unification highlighted his response to the chaos of the state after the 1911 Revolution. With Yuan Shi-kai, a powerful figure, constantly strengthening the centralization of power after he abolished the governor, it eventually evolved into a monarchy and made the feudal autocracy reappear. Li changed his focus on decentralized federal system. He reassessed the value of federal system hoping to strengthen the power of people to fight against the authoritarian forces. This adjustment reflected Li's continuous exploration of China in future, but what remained unchanged was his conception to build a stable and effective modern country.

Limited Approval of Party Politics

During this period, on the one hand, Li appreciated western political party system; on the other hand, he severely criticized the operation of Chinese party politics. Because of repeated disasters in China's history, Li expressly rectified the name of modern political parties. They would make the country prosperous instead of endangering it if they were properly used to promote with healthy competition. Li also realized that political parties carrying the political spirit of a constitutional country were the result of modern constitutional politics. However, when it started in China, political parties were accused of perishing country. Li believed the situation was out of this reason that political parties of the Republic of China just knew how to dispute opinions instead of fight for political opinions, and they relied on warlord forces to consolidate themselves. So when parties fight, it's time to use military (Li, 2013d, pp. 1-2).

Most political parties in the Republic of China rising by force claimed credit for themselves and became arrogant after the revolution; they continued to control power using fine-sounding "Republic", and described themselves "are creating republican happiness for people". The so-called political parties under this kind of Republic were just gathering a motley crew respectively to show off. They depicted themselves as "moderates, radicals or eclecticism"; they also added their party's glory through supporting one or two former party members and revolutionary officers. Actually, the so-called moderates were just cunning old bureaucrats, the radicals were just arrogant thugs, and the eclecticism were nothing more than watching for proper moment for action (Li, 2013b,

p. 7). The political parties' programs were all advertised as for people, but their social policies made to win people's support were just nominally. Politicians squandered wealth plundering from the people to "indulged in disgusting orgies of eating and drinking" in the capital. They got votes with thousands of dollars treating politics just as a tool to take power. As for the people, they disguised to "act as representative for people and exclude difficulty and anxiety for them". "How could they put enough time and energy to focus on people's livelihood when they are indulged in competing for power and profit?" (Li, 2013b, pp. 8-9) All party branches spent huge amount in elections, "the so-called party members are plundering people thoroughly" (Li, 2013b, p. 8). Therefore, the so-called democracy was the dictatorship of a few powerful people rather than people's independent policy, the civil rights were the right of a few powerful people rather than all of people, and happiness belonged to a few powerful people rather than the broad masses (Li, 2013b, p. 9). In the late Qing Dynasty, people were happy to talk about "civil rights", but after the Republic was completed, they were shocked as be poured cold water when talked about it; they "hide pain in heart and are too sad to hear it" (Li, 2013e, pp. 73-74).

Because of this, Li believed parliament not government was the biggest threat of the Republic of China. He sighed the constitution which was always made to guard against the autocracy of president and government, but failed to guard against the autocracy of parliament; he also sighed people always worried about the autocracy of government caused by centralization of power, and never considered decentralization would lead to collapse of the country (Li, 2013e, pp. 74-75). In program, the president and members of parliament were all elected by people, and the government and parliament were state organs, so the parliament was not necessarily more virtuous than presidential government. Moreover, there were many people in parliament; it would be more serious than one person autocracy if the parliament does evil. Just as centralization may turn into autocracy, local decentralization would cause provincial governors act the tyrant in a locality, "someone are the emperor and someone are the king"; the people became puppet at their disposal. Political parties judged men and things out of their private perspective; they described the same party as sacred and alien party as thief. Who followed them would live and who disobeyed would die. As for people's livelihood and national security, they never treated seriously. Therefore, no matter warlord or violent party controlled by a few people, it's just the practice of using violence against violence in this regime (Li, 2013e, p. 75). Politicians under such political parties had no political belief; they ran around in the tide of evil politics all day to seek a living, "there is no difference between their interest and beetles who were interested in playing with dung balls". Politicians were so foolhardy that the political climate was naturally lifeless where "politicians are full of the Republic of China, and the Republic of China is also a foolhardy republic" (Li, 2013f, pp. 97-98).

In Li's opinion, there was causality between the alienation of party politics and the chaos of speech of the Republic of China. After the Revolution of 1911, freedom of speech overflowed everywhere like flood with the awakening of public opinion. Public opinion with own style could offer advice and suggestions; although there were many good words, many extreme words existed at the same time. When people had no idea to control their own words, then going too far was as bad as not going far enough. "When they spoke out without scruple", then they failed to distinguish right from wrong. "Today those who used words to dispose things took advantage of their party's private opinion inevitably, they spoke and acted on behalf of themselves according to unreliable rumors or superficial phenomena". Those with corrupt moral character created slander randomly for the sake of their own party, "regardless of the honor or disgrace of the state system, the protection or loss of personality and the right or wrong outside world" (Li, 2013g, p. 101). Finally they opposed things just because they wanted to oppose it, treating their same party as leader and the opposite party as thief, "they always reversed black and

white, and confused right and wrong". This phenomenon prevailed in China, making it difficult to distinguish right from wrong, and hiding the truth and justice over. As a result, people's hearts would be in discord, and the country would be divided by speech, and the world would be forever caught in hot water (Li, 2013g, p. 102).

For this reason, Li advocated that Chinese Parliament should adopt unicameral system to avoid parliamentary disputes to the greatest extent. Because Chinese people were always slow in doing things, compared with bicameral system it's better to adopt unicameral system especially cabinet parliamentary system to prevent hasty decision-making and then to improve efficiency. And as to the problem how to prevent autocracy of the government caused by cabinet parliamentary, Li still put his hope on the balance between two parties in constitutional country. Although the cabinet members came from the same party, members of Congress would not be controlled by one party. If these two parties could work together and supervise each other, when ruling party made policy failure, the party out of power then would replace it, and the government would not be allowed to do things arbitrarily. From this conception we can see that Li still wanted to save country with the framework from western parliamentary politics despite he was deeply worried about the practice of party politics in the Republic of China, and there was no doubt he believed the British cabinet system was unparalleled in the world because it achieved political effectiveness and harmony (Li, 2013h, pp. 93-94). In view of people lacking political quality, Li believed it would better to coordinate indirect elections and limited elections at the beginning of unicameral system, and it would expand the scope of electoral rights with the development of politics. However, Li valued the efficiency of the unicameral system; he also thought the direct popular election should not be suddenly implemented (Li, 2013h, p. 95). It can be said that Li still had more doubts about the effectiveness of parliamentary politics and people's political quality in China before Yuan Shi-kai restored ancient ways unscrupulously to prepare for becoming emperor.

Li wanted to build a modern civil service system, which "makes good use of personnel, combines official and academic together", namely the so-called "bureaucracy" (Li, 2013i, p. 87). He explained the western term bureaucracy from the perspective of "ideal bureaucratic system"; he advocated to establish a professional bureaucratic team according to knowledge, who would handle public affairs with unified norms and standards fairly. On the one hand, political parties have increasingly become the tools for politicians to hunt for profits; on the other hand, Chinese people were morally corrupt and easily misled by external benefits, to establish a bureaucratic system where personnel advancement according to knowledge should reform from the bottom. In Li's opinion, this bureaucratic system would go hand in hand with democratic politics. Even countries with developed democratic politics in Europe and the United States were aware of the disadvantage of electing officials only by the people, and they took official appointment system to supplement; therefore, China could not gab about civil affairs and reject the bureaucratic system (Li, 2013i, p. 88).

To criticize party politics did not mean to deny the republican system. But with the tide of Yuan Shi-kai's return to the ancients, speculative politicians deluded the republican system was incompatible with China's national conditions. Facing the possibility of returning to old road of feudal autocracy, Li changed his critical tone of parliamentary politics, and began to explain the necessity of republican system from the perspective of social change. He thought that in ancient China, ethnic groups were gathered as villages, and the grass-root society was maintained by etiquette and customs, which made people have litter relationship with the state power, and then they were indifferent to politics. However, in modern times, government affairs were busy, the use of finance was increasing, and the burden on people was greatly increased, all of these made people's every movement and action closely related to the country. So people began to sacrifice their lives to fight for political

participation. It would be incompatible with the changed national conditions if we still thought people should obey the administrative will out of the reason that people were not used to representative politics (Li, 2013j, p. 205). On the contrary, only by implementing representative politics can contemporary China be free from the scourge of mass resistance. Under the wrong understanding of the situation in China, American political scientist Goodnow thought Chinese people had a life of hardship so they lacked the ability to participate in politics; he also believed that

Chinese people are not accustomed to representative politics but have the habit of obeying orders and resisting tyranny. Out of this consideration, if people want to make everything on good terms when the autocratic regime having exist thousands of years is changed into a republic, its government must have the ability to maintain order. (Li, 2013j, p. 206)

This kind of view thinking China as “feudal empire” was just “digging up the ancient European literary stories to describe China in political transformation” (Li, 2013j, p. 207). It ignored the difference between modern and ancient times of the country, and its purpose was just to advocate Yuan Shi-kai's reign as emperor. Although the livelihood of Chinese people was difficult, it was not impossible for them to participate in politics, and Japan with a similar situation would make the example. The essence of government should maintain social order no matter it was in East or West, republicanism or autocracy, and China's change to a republican system exactly fitted to this (Li, 2013j, p. 206). Li then appealed that the true meaning of republican politics would not be abandoned as if it were left behind.

Rely on the Awakening and Power of the People

After learning from republican politics was not worthy of its name, Li realized that the root cause of problem was that people's power did not grow up with the change of system. The morality of our country degenerated after the revolution (Li, 2013k, p. 43); thieves and gambling were still rampant in the provinces which were not damaged near the capital. People had no idea of republican awareness and legal consciousness; when they were arrested by government because of their misconduct, they said “Is it not the Republic of China?” Those provinces affected by war were full of banditry and people in these were living in poverty. Warlords did not know how to control, officials were cunning and deceitful, and people's grievances were rife (Li, 2013c, p. 63). Confronted with this situation, Li believed it was not a crime of republicanism, and the powerful were not worried about; the key point was decline of people's virtue and weakness of their strength: “Because people's strength rests on people's virtue, and people's rights rest on people's strength, so how could people without virtue have strength? And how could they without strength have rights?” If the civil power was not commensurate with the civil rights, “their power would surely fall to the sidelines”, and then would be stolen by powerful people (Li, 2013e, pp. 74-76).

It's a must to cultivate people's strength that would help us to return to the normal. Li believed that severe punishment and laws could not work well; we need to appeal to emotion and reason to inspire people's repentance to deal with the degeneration of social morality. People with lofty ideals should guide the transformation of people's minds with wisdom, “if everyone loves peace in conscience, then peace will come into being, if everyone hates violence in conscience, then violence will hide itself, and if everyone regrets sin in conscience, then sin will be eliminated” (Li, 2013a, p. 81). Because people were weak, it needed these with lofty ideals to take more attention to engage in national education using their revolutionary spirit and boldness of that wartime. Only by cultivating people's strength through 10 years' contribution could we achieve civil rights and bring the republican

effect into play (Li, 2013e, p. 76). Therefore, people themselves should take action, and undertake bravely the responsibility of “clarifying ups and downs of the world, and standard people’s minds”, “there is possible to thrive in folk when group pivot is inclined to the government, and there is possible to change through education when custom is bad for politics”. In the past, those who regarded themselves as saints would deceive the public so as to build up a reputation, and ruin the people and the country when they achieved their ambition; in fact, most scholars only wanted to seek officials, “they will depend on this party when it is blooming, and they will cater to the one who is in power”. Only by revitalizing education could we change this situation, and this would need everyone to do their own duty. Both sages and heroes were not be relied on, “because it’s everyone’s responsibility to revitalize education”. Li specially warned people not to think that engaging in education was just “the matter to recite classics and tell stories” (Li, 2013l, p. 160), and was slow action which cannot adapt to urgent needs. When it became popular, it could show strong strength and turn the country’s ethos. This was that the so-called everyone should be responsible for the rise and fall of the world (Li, 2013l, p. 161).

With Yuan Shi-kai increasingly moving towards the retro autocracy, Li began to explore the long-term stability of the country from a broader perspective of political confrontation. He had to adjust his attention to cultivate antagonistic forces and form a political balance, aiming at not only the shortcomings of parliamentary parties, but also the urgent task of preventing autocracy (Li, 2013m, p. 179). There were two requirements to form this political balance: One was that the people in power could accept the political forces of different factions to shape a useful political confrontation and the other was that the political opposition could maintain an independent spirit to prevent arbitrariness and rebellion, and to avoid the morale struggles of past dynasties (Li, 2013m, pp. 180-182). The political parties should get rid of the feelings of gratitude and resentment, and work together to supervise the authorities. The reason why Yuan Shi-kai’s perversion could not be curbed was that the Congress was dissolved, the political parties were lax and lacking autonomy ability, and all in all, there was no confrontation force in politics (Li, 2013m, p. 184). Li confined the formation of this confrontation to the political framework, with the purpose to follow the republican system. He hoped the revolutionary party would give up violent revolution and engage in peaceful political competition. In this regard, he criticized Kuomintang of China for “advocating emotion and blood”, especially organizing the second revolution with military, which led to the collapse of the party politics that flourished in the Republic of China under the influence of violence (Li, 2013m, p. 184). And this would destroy the national movement and people’s lives, “today’s one organ will grow up one party tomorrow, and drive the ambitious young people and unemployed vagrants to bury autocratic politics”. Li deliberately borrowed Tolstoy’s words to express good politics would comply with people’s conscience rather than be achieved through violence, that “the true freedom can only be obtained when we stop obeying the authority of all human circles, instead of being gained by fighting and killing” (Li, 2013m, p. 185). He also exclaimed, “what is the existence of people’s power in the past dynasties? And what is the existence of the national destiny on the day of competition among heroes?” To truly form such political confrontation, the whole society should uphold justice and not be driven by power and wealth. Li proposed that the development of the world was based on the change of human thought, any person or system was just the embodiment of the people’s ideological will, and the wisdom and strength of the people were the biggest new force today. China has entered the era of the masses, lest would be used by powerful figures and losing own resistance; people should be aware of their own strength to create an authoritarian trend finally (Li, 2013m, pp. 188-189). Intellectuals should not disdain the power and decisive position of the masses, and should not be superstitious about heroes who could create the times. On the contrary, they should respect their spiritual dignity and subjective will, and never be held

hostage by outside world. They should advocate learning, hold the sense of honor, be upright and value good custom, and thus they could lead the people to wake up gradually. Li firmly believed that with the people becoming self-reliance and self-strengthening, the powerful figures would be tamed by the will of the masses and no longer act recklessly (Li, 2013m, p. 190).

At the same time of the resurrection of China's imperial system, the national crisis was also deepening. Japan took advantage of the chance that the western powers were engaging in the First World War, and proposed Twenty-one Demands to control China exclusively. In the face of this subjugation crisis, Li still put his hope of saving the country on all citizens,

First of all, we must identify China as the country of our 40 million people who are not willing to die in front of any strong enemy, and there is no strong enemy who would perish China before our 40 million people die. (Li, 2013n, p. 219)

He called on the government to stop this adverse current as soon as possible, and realize their "fault of abandoning the people". It's time to restore the real public opinion organs, popularize national education, and firmly rely on the strength of the people (Li, 2013o, pp. 243-244). As for the people themselves, Li called on them to cheer up through absorbing the perseverance of modern civic spirit, and to exert themselves with theory of freewill, and to consciously integrate the strengths of eastern and western civilizations to improve the spirit of nation building, "seeking a lovely country to love it" (Li, 2013p, pp. 250-252). Under the circumstances of domestic trouble and foreign invasion, Li completed the transformation of public cognition. He changed his early criticism of "the degeneration of social morality", and clearly affirmed that Chinese people have a conscience and good ability. As for the words from Goodnow, Li thought it was just to confuse the authorities, and he encouraged the people should not think lightly of themselves because of it. For the responsibility of today's people, one would be to transform China with modern national ideas to make it benefit the people truly; the second would be to pursue sincerely with the new spirit of modern citizens. Li was optimistic about this, because he believed that our country would still be bright and ambitious so long as the people could work hard and do their responsibility, and there was no need to be depressed by current declined state of affairs. He also deliberately warned the people that one country's failure was not due to outsiders, but to their own fault, and the crime of national subjugation was not the responsibility of the outside world, but the responsibility of its people (Li, 2013p, p. 253). Therefore, the future of our country depended on the will and power of all citizens; they should shoulder this great responsibility and march forward bravely (Li, 2013o, p. 244).

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