

The Chinese Origins of Democracy: Dynamic Confucianism in Singapore.

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Abstract

This paper examines the deployment of religion in the effort to raise nationalist consciousness among the Chinese community in colonial Singapore in the early twentieth century. It has often been noted that religion played a significant role in the emergence of nationalism in colonised Asia. However, the religions usually thought of in this context have been Islam and Buddhism, rather than Confucianism (Chong 2009: 2). With the formation of the Young Men's Buddhist Association in 1906 which inaugurated moves towards nationalist consciousness in Burma, or the organisation of the Sarekat Islam in 1912, which was an early milestone in the development of the Indonesian nationalist movement, Buddhism and Islam demonstrated their dynamic potential in the realm of politics. Confucianism, on the other hand, has generally had a reputation as an ossified, elitist and obsolescent form of religion. In fact it has been quite common for Western commentators to deny that it was a religion at all.

This paper focuses on the intellectual contributions of an outstanding Chinese Singaporean community leader, Lim Boon Keng. Lim looked to Confucianism as a source of national pride for the diasporic Chinese community living under British colonial rule in Singapore. Directly contradicting Western assumptions about the rigidity and authoritarianism of Confucianism, Lim offered an interpretation which highlighted its dynamic, progressive political potential. In particular, he developed the case for Confucianism as a source of democratic political impetus, and thus as a challenge to the autocratic, elitist nature of the British system of colonial rule.

In Singapore the period from 1890 to 1920 was one of marked demographic shifts, social change, rapid economic development and intellectual ferment. At that time Singapore was a British colony, ruled as part of the British Empire according to policies laid down by the Colonial Office in London. From the time of its acquisition as a colony in 1819, the British had adopted a policy of welcoming unrestricted immigration from a wide variety of sources. The result was a multi-cultural population, numerically dominated by Chinese, with Indians and Malays making up the two other main ethnic groups. By 1891 the population numbered about 180,000, with Chinese representing approximately two-thirds of the total.

A prominent leader of the Chinese community in this period was Lim Boon Keng (1869-1957), a second generation Straits born Chinese. After completing his schooling in Singapore, Lim took up a scholarship to study medicine in Edinburgh, returning to Singapore in 1893 to start his own practice. In 1895 he was appointed to represent the Chinese community in the Straits Settlements Legislative Council, an advisory body chosen by the British governor. He represented the Chinese on many other committees, and in 1918 was awarded an OBE. His links with China were also strong. In the last days of the Manchu dynasty he accepted the post of medical adviser and inspector-general of hospitals in Beijing. After the revolution of 1911, he was appointed as confidential secretary and personal physician to Sun Yat-sen. Lim returned to Singapore when Yuan Shikai took over the presidency of the republic. In 1921 he became vice-chancellor of the University of Amoy (Xiamen) and remained in China until 1937. When the Japanese invaded Singapore in 1941, he was imprisoned but later represented the Chinese community in negotiations with the Japanese. Throughout his career Lim wrote many books and articles. He was also a successful entrepreneur in the rubber, tin, shipping, media, insurance and other industries.

Within the apparently uncongenial milieu of Singapore under British colonial rule, Lim advocated a resurgence of Confucianism as a way of encouraging nationalist awareness among the Chinese community. In particular he argued that the intellectual resources of Confucianism could be used to support progressive political change. Lim's conversion to Confucianism was gradual, but by 1899 he identified himself as a convert. He objected strongly to Western commentators' attempts to deny that Confucianism was a religion (Lim 1917: 1).

Lim Boon Keng made the claim that Confucian principles of government were democratic. Indeed, he believed that democracy had already been achieved in China's early history, referring proudly to the "important democratic institutions of the ancient Chinese" (Lim 1915a: 94). In an important paper delivered in 1915, he argued that the Confucian conception of the State was founded on democratic principles (Lim 1915a: 97).

According to Lim Boon Keng, Confucianism comprises a number of closely inter-related “departments:” (a) Philosophy; (b) Theology; (c) Anthropology; (d) Ethics; and (e) Politics. This range of concerns made Confucianism, in Lim’s view, a complete and rounded study of humanity, chiefly from a pragmatic point of view, as well as an “all-sufficient religion” (Lim 1913: 142). In order to understand Lim’s political thought, it is necessary to outline briefly his interpretation of Confucian principles within each of these departments.

Under the heading of Philosophy, Lim asserted that there is an all-pervading law, absolutely true, underlying all natural processes whether physical, mental or spiritual. Consequently there is a “right way for all things human or divine” (Lim 1915a: 94). The way (*dao*) is unitary, hence for human beings to flourish they must bring themselves into harmony with it. Lim’s theology was based on the claim that behind all the multiple phenomena of the world there is a Supreme Being, or Supreme Ruler. The terms of Lim’s argument thus slip easily from theology to theocracy. However, the wishes of this divine ruler were to be interpreted according to the common aspirations and ideals of humanity. As he put it, the “*Vox Populi* is the only recognisable *Vox Dei*” (Lim 1915a: 94). This is, to say the least, a marked democratic move in Lim’s argument. By identifying the *vox populi* as the only accessible source of information about the desires of the divine authority available to humanity, he gives the people the ultimate word. In this formulation the source of political legitimacy is not the will of the people as such; instead legitimacy is established on transcendent sacred origins. Nevertheless, the will of the people is recognised as a direct, and directly perceptible reflection of the will of the transcendent deity or of Heaven.

Under the heading Anthropology, Lim acknowledged humanity as the highest product of evolution, a concept by the way that he believed originated in ancient China. Because human beings had developed knowledge and conscience, they were fitted to act as instruments of the divine in working upon and transforming the natural world. Implanted with the germ of benevolence, under the guidance of the sages, humanity has the capacity to move towards altruism and eventually to achieve a universal global community of peace. Ethics demands that humanity must be ruled by and bring itself into alignment with the universal law. In this way the social relations of communal life

would be harmonious. To prevent any falling back into barbarism, education is indispensable and therefore education should be universal (Lim 1915a: 94).

Finally, under the heading of politics, Lim Boon Keng puts all the emphasis on democratic principles. Under Confucian conceptions, the State is to be governed for the benefit of the people. The chief authority to whom Lim turned to support this view was Mengzi (Mencius, 371-289 BCE). Mengzi is generally acknowledged to be the most creative and influential follower of Kongzi (Confucius, 551-479 BCE), born about one hundred years after Kongzi's death. Mengzi laid out an order of priority in the political realm: "the people are the most important; next comes the country, and lastly stands the ruler" (Lim 1915a: 95). Thus according to Mengzi, it was the ruler's first duty to provide for the welfare and prosperity of the people. In much of his thinking on democracy, Lim Boon Keng revealed a heavy debt to Mengzi. Lim followed Mengzi in the view that human nature is essentially good (Lim 1915b: 47-8). Mengzi argued that the political legitimacy of a government derives from the acceptance or consent of the people. He stated clearly that the people may always justly overthrow a ruler who harms them. Mengzi's idea of the right to rebel can be compared to John Locke's right to revolution, as expounded in his *Two Treatises of Government*.

In his discussion of democratic politics, Lim also appealed to the contributions of a more recent Confucian authority, Kang Youwei (K'ang Yu-wei, 1858-1927). Kang had almost lost his life by proposing a programme of political reforms to the rulers of the moribund Manchu dynasty during the 1890s. Kang set out the progressive stages of development of the State as follows: (1) nomadic tribal state; (2) territorial chieftaincy; (3) feudal state; (4) imperial state; (5) republic; (6) communist state. Lim endorsed this categorisation as representing the progressive changes in the form of the State over the course of Chinese history. He certainly saw no contradiction between Confucianism and republicanism, and also believed that certain socialistic policies, such as nationalisation of land, means of communication and public utilities, could be justified by Confucian arguments (Lim 1915a: 97-98).

From these premises and arguments Lim drew significant conclusions about the proper functioning of a Confucian State:

The people are the foundation of the State. The country is for the benefit of the people. The ruler and administrators are to serve the people...The sole *raison d'être* of the State is for the preservation and maintenance of the people, and for the provision of all human requirements in peace and prosperity (Lim 1915a: 96).

From the fundamental principles could also be deduced the appropriate rights and duties of the component parts of the State. The ruler is in theory “the viceregent of God.” He (never she) must “serve the State in the interests of the governed” and is responsible both to God and to the people (Lim 1915a: 96). The people have the right to life and liberty if they discharge certain definite obligations to the State. In return they are to receive protection, education and government. The reciprocal rights of the people also encompassed rights to justice, to property, to freedom of religion, and to a share in administration or self-government. The right to rebel against tyranny or misgovernment Lim, like Mengzi, considered “inalienable” (Lim 1915a: 97).

Lim Boon Keng readily admitted that these Confucian ideals had not always been put into practice during the course of Chinese history. He conceded that “tyrants have oppressed the people from time to time,” but pointed out that China was “not the only land where high ideals have failed to become realised to their fullest extent” (Lim 1915a: 97). Furthermore, even though Confucian principles had never been thoroughly applied in practice, yet they “had achieved greater moral results than any other system of religion or morals” (Lim 1913: 136). Even in “degenerate times,” when Chinese governments had become oppressive, no central government had dared to deny that the people were paramount. At the end of the last dynasty in 1911, even the Manchus declared when abdicating that the emperor yielded to the will of Heaven and the voice of the people (Lim 1913: 136).

Lim traced the democratic foundations of Chinese civilisation back to the earliest period of ancient Chinese history, or prehistory, associated with the emergence of culture heroes and sage kings. Like most Confucian scholars, he stressed the prime importance of this era, which laid the foundations and established the cultural patterns that would guide Chinese development for nearly five millennia. This period can be dated as approximately 2800 to 2200 BCE, before the first dynasty, the Xia dynasty (2100-1600 BCE). Lim characterised this formative period of Chinese history as one of social equality. For leadership, the people willingly gave their allegiance to a number of

morally outstanding rulers. According to Lim, the principles of the sage founders of Chinese civilisation were “essentially democratic.” He regarded the kings of this time as moral exemplars and model rulers (Lim 1913: 134). These god-kings were altruistic and used their supernatural powers to improve the lives of the people. About two thousand years later, Kongzi and his disciple Mengzi talked a great deal about the merits of these legendary kings, endorsing and preserving these ideas about correct political relationships and “thus imparting upon the politics and administration of China the democratic characteristics which distinguish Chinese institutions from those of the West” (Lim 1913: 135).

Lim Boon Keng most definitely did not look to Western concepts of democracy as the source of his ideas. In fact, the historical trajectory he described was one where the Jesuit missionaries who arrived in China from the sixteenth century were so impressed by Chinese political developments, “and with their profound democratic import,” that when they reported what they had seen in Europe, the Chinese model inspired the works of Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot and the Encyclopedists (Lim 1913: 138). For Lim it was one of the great ironies of history that these European philosophical works were then being imported into republican China and avidly consumed by Chinese as new insights.

Lim repeatedly drew contrasts between China and the West, always with a sharply critical eye on Western theory and practice. At times these contrasting pictures must have been unsettling for his European audience, threatening to overturn their preconceptions about the general hopelessness of the Chinese and the superiority of all things Western. For instance, Lim pointed to an immense gulf separating social relations in Europe and in China. Whereas in Europe there had existed slavery and serfdom until very recent times, “the free people of China have been contented with their domestic and village liberties” (Lim 1913: 134). Contrasting the Confucian conception of the State with comparatively recent Western notions, Lim insisted that “*L’etat s’est [sic] moi*’ is the very antithesis of the Confucian conception” and that “it is, from the beginning to the end, the very opposite of the prevalent idea of Machiavelli, that in the interests of the State the ends may justify the means, even if immoral” (Lim 1915a: 95).

In making his argument for the consistency of Confucianism and democracy, Lim found the intellectual resources available within Confucianism sufficient to his needs. He was able to appeal to Confucian authorities such as Kongzi, Mengzi and Kang Youwei. He also referred to an idealised portrait of a Golden Age with democratic characteristics in the distant Chinese past. On these bases he was able to draw unfavourable comparisons between Europe and China, in terms of both theory and practice, explicitly challenging Western claims to own democratic thought. In spite of the unconducive environment in which he lived, Lim Boon Keng was able to deploy the resources of religion to mount a challenge to autocratic rule.

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