

# From a Confucian Literati to a Military General: Li Hung Chang's Views of Western Technology (1885-1896)

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on Li Hung Chang (1823-1901)'s visit to England and America in 1896, to rethink and reevaluate the important role Li played at that historical time. Li Hung Chang toured Europe and America in 1896 as an imperial envoy of the first rank. Although some aspects of Li's career and evaluation have been given monographic treatment, there is yet little study on his comments on his attitudes toward Western science and technology. This paper argues that if modernization is a matter of modern state power as an army, navy, or diplomatic corps, then Li was certainly a modernizer. But if modernization is a deeper process of organizational and institutional change, Li was not a determined modernizer. In fact, Li relied heavily on patronage even when he could exercise legitimate political power, in order to advocate Self-Strengthening Movement.

**Keywords:** Self-Strengthening Movement, Confucian Literati, Li Hung Chang, Western Technology

In the second half of the 19th century, China experienced an unprecedented internal and external crisis. Many high literary degree holders became involved in military affairs, including a powerful man: Li Hung Chang 李鸿章 (1823-1901) (Note 1). As a strong advocate of Western technology, a firm military general and a pragmatic industrial leader, Li helped develop arsenals, shipyards, and steamship transports, which later played key roles in Chinese military and industrial development and foreign diplomacy. Li toured Europe and America in 1896 as a first rank imperial envoy. The aims of Li's visit were threefold: to suppress Japan through diplomacy, to investigate the possibility of raising China's revenue through the customs services, and to gain first-hand knowledge of the Western politics, science and technology. This trip made Li even more famous in both China and the Western world. The *Dianshizhai Pictorial*, which offered top Chinese government officials an opportunity to promote their political opinions and become public personalities, or even public heroes, printed two portraits of him during this trip. One portrait was published by *Harper's Bazaar* in 1885, with the following comment,

The American soldier and Chinese viceroy by his side present a striking contrast in their appearance. Li Hung Chang is the most remarkable man in the Chinese Empire- great in both peace and war. During the Taiping rebellion he commanded the imperial forces, and crushed that most threatening revolt. "General Grant and I," he said to his visitor, "have crushed the two greatest rebellions known in history." His name has since then become familiar to every diplomatist of the Western world. (*Harper's Bazaar*, 1885)

Although some aspects of Li's career and evaluation have been given monographic treatment, there is yet little study, as far as I know, on his comments on certain aspects of Western politics and his overall views towards the adoption of Western science and technology. What gave rise to these comments and views? How were the Western politics and their focus on science and technology, in Li's mind, different from the traditional Chinese statecraft? Could Li be considered a thorough and determined Modernizer from his comments and views?

## 1. Introduction

As Liang Qichao 梁启超, author of the Li's first Chinese biography, said: "I respect Li's talent; I bemoan Li's insight; I regret Li's destiny. Those who read recent Chinese history must know Li Hung-Chang; those who read Li's biography must know recent Chinese history" (Liang, 1936). However, evaluation of Li Hung-Chang is controversial as well as complicated. On the one hand, Li has been criticized for irregular financial dealings, nepotism and cronyism, dismissed as a "mere" politician, decried by Marxist historians for his role in the

suppression of the Taiping rebellion (1850-1864), and faulted by Chinese nationalists for his failure to curb Japanese expansion and vilified for allegedly selling out China to foreigners (Liang, 1951). These derogatory evaluations were perpetuated by twentieth-century Chinese historians (Hu, 1981). Till recent three decades, the reevaluation of Li Hung-Chang is discussed by a few Chinese scholars to restore his reputation (Zhou, 1989; Liu & Zhu, 1995). On the other hand, Li's evaluation by Western scholars is generally higher than Chinese researchers. Since as early as 1899, some biography and several monographs have been published in English, and the reports in Western print media such as newspaper and periodicals were interested in Li. Furthermore, some valuable and complete English academic works try to reappraisal Li's reputation and point out his mistakes at the same time (Wright, 1966; Chu & Liu, 1994; Rankin, 1995).

In view of some evidence, this essay reevaluates Li as a pragmatic official and diplomat, while not a thorough and determined modernizer. Especially, based on original sources, the essay will focus on Li's comments on the western policy and technology recorded in English and American newspaper and periodicals. These description and records about Li in English mainstream print media have not received enough attention yet. This essay argues that if modernization is a matter of such accouterments of modern state power as army, navy, or diplomatic corps, then Li was certainly a modernizer. But if modernization is a deeper process of organizational and institutional change, is Li still a determined modernizer? In fact, Li relied heavily on patronage even when he could exercise legitimate political power. Particularly, Li used informal bureaucratic relationships to exert influence in the Yangzi valley and to maintain support among the merchants of that region. As a result, Li's reliance on traditional forms of political organization and his accommodation of the Qing court and his own corrupt subordinates tie him firmly to China's political past.

Given the complexity of late imperial history and of the daunting obstacles faced by Li, the reevaluation of Li needs to be presented without undue praise or blame as an extraordinarily able man who was a leading figure in bringing about the institutional and ideological adjustments. Li wanted to learn from the foreigners, especially as a pragmatic diplomat aware of the complex realities of international power. While his reliance on traditional administrative arrangements, lax political morality, and tendency to work for short-run success must be considered against his very real accomplishments. Since Li undertook defensive modernization and pursued innovation to preserve the traditional core rather than to change it, the policies were narrow in space and scope, but actually open the paths for China to follow into the modern world.

## 2. Pragmatic Official and Diplomat

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the remarkable career of Li Hung-Chang contained different roles as a Confucian official, General of Huai Army, commander of military and industrial projects and the chief Diplomatic spokesman. Becoming a governor in Shanghai in 1862, Li was the foremost champion of self-strengthening policy of building up China's military and financial power, primarily through the adoption of Western technology. What is the relationship between Li's policies and Confucian values? What is Li's role as a patriot and pragmatist? How his policy proposals arose, and how they differed from the pattern of traditional Chinese statecraft? Some research has been explored on the origins and nature of the new policies Li came to advocate.

Reviewing of Li's early career, it needs to be emphasized that his training and connections were within the traditional pattern. He was born in an upper-class family in Hefei of Anhui province, and went through the examination system rapidly with distinction.

In addition, Li made efforts in introducing western education and transmission new science and technology. Li was the first high Qing official to advocate teaching Western mathematics and sciences in government schools. Li even recommended a new category in the civil service examination for men who specialized in the techniques of machine-manufacturing (Liu, 1970). Although he was committed to the essentials of Chinese tradition as he understood them, and he wanted to borrow Western methods primarily to protect that tradition, he knew that he was borrowing and innovating and was refreshingly impatient with those who did not. To one of these he retorted "You have said that mathematics is similar to astronomy, which was one of the six arts of Confucius, and that this proves that Confucius himself paid attention to mathematics. But how many precise mathematical instruments have been handed down to us by the Sage?"

Another aspect of Li Hung-Chang's role was his role in modern industrial enterprises, in developing arsenals, shipping, railways and certain types of manufacturing. Among these projects, the most famous of Li's modernizing projects were the Jiangnan Arsenal 江南制造局, the China Merchants' Steam Navigation Company 轮船招商局, and the Pei-yang Navy 北洋水师. However, the most criticize evaluation of Li Hung-Chang is about his diplomacy, especially the negotiations and the signatures in several treaties such as the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895) for

which he was criticized for selling China to the foreign countries. But as a matter of fact, Li was a pragmatic diplomat, who made efforts to gain interests for Imperial Qing and also consider the interests for people.

In view of this evidence, it can be concluded that Li's voice was "the strongest and most consistent warning of the danger from a rising Japan; that he did his best to build up China's land and naval forces and in 1894 to avoid precipitating a war for which he knew China was not prepared"; and that in 1895 he did all any man would have done to mitigate the terms of the Treaty of Shimonoseki (Mary, 1966). The naval disaster was an inevitable consequence of the position in which Li found himself. The bureaucratic critics of modernization were so powerful that Li had no choice but to base the naval administration on his regional network. But the very forces which had made the Huai Army a success were fatal to a navy.

Turning from a Confucian to a General and to a Diplomat, did he remain within the usual mode of a Confucian statesman? Despite the fact that Li showed a degree of cultural open-mindedness, he never questioned the Confucian socio-political order-which still commanded his loyalty and was in any case the source of his personal success and power. In his anxiety to get larger revenue for the government, he did not hesitate to recommend that large and influential landowners be made to bear their share of the tax burden (Li, 1921). Moreover, Though Li was willing to introduce western technology, his proposals for reform were plainly not comprehensive; in fact, they were limited to certain adjustments in educational and personnel policy, in the size and training of the armed forces, and in the regulations concerning merchants.

In a word, the reforms that Li advocated were limited in nature. The very pragmatism that enabled Li to see the need for new policies also prompted him to make compromises with the existing military and administrative practices. While the policies Li advocated were far-reaching for the China of his time and are of great significance to any study of China's tortuous history of modernization, the compromises that Li made were in no way modern in spirit, even though they represented in fact a derogation of Confucian principles.

### 3. Li's Visit to See Western Technology

Li Hung Chang visited Great Britain in August 1896. The aims of Li's visit were threefold: to contain Japan through diplomacy; to probe into the possibility of raising revenue through the Chinese Customs service; to gain first-hand knowledge of the West, especially about the politics and science and technology. What were Li's comments on some Western politics? What were Li's attitudes to Western science and technology? What did Li think how to learn from the West? Since few Chinese scholars pay attention to comments and receptions about Li reported on English print media, this section will focus on several topics about politics, science and technology, particularly in Britain and America.

While in the UK, he was received by Queen Victoria at Osborne House, Isle of Wight, and also met with a number of important people, including the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, Lord Salisbury, and the former Prime Minister, William Gladstone (Note 2). These leaders eagerly showed off their new science and technology in order to sell their technological products. This gave Li an opportunity to get a clearer picture of the strength of British science and technology.

Later, Li gave a speech at Barrow Town Hall, conveyed through an interpreter, in which he briefly compared the differences between China and Britain. "China," Li stated, "is a nation of literature and philosophy. These are rather abstract subjects, but although the English people are the most practical in the world, they have still produced such eminent men in literature and philosophy as Lord Bacon, Shakespeare, Herbert Spencer, Darwin, and Huxley, and they have arrived at the same conclusion as our Liotsz[sic] and Confucius; but their principles were deduced from the experimental sciences in the most tangible form (The Daily News, 1896)." We can see from this congratulatory speech that Li appeared to have had a very level-headed understanding, with regard to the cultural differences between China and Britain and the reasons behind Britain's scientific and technological superiority.

Li also gave a flamboyant toast at the reception for the Great Eastern Extension (telegraph and cable) company in Greenwich, in which he particularly emphasized the importance of communication, "We live in a world of evolution, in which the two principles, the struggle for existence, and the survival of the fittest, will always hold good. Telegraphy and railways are the fittest means of communication, not only for the benefit of England and China, but for the benefit of the humankind in this world (The Times, 1896)." It appears from this speech Li welcomed the amalgamation of European skills with the abundant natural resources in China. While on his visit, Li witnessed grand scenes of British economic prosperity and military strength, and showed profound interest in her science and technology. One such case in point is that when at Newcastle, on learning that this was the hometown of George Stephenson, he paid a special visit to the former residence of the "Father of Railways" and to his offspring. He must surely have reflected on his own traumatic experience of building railways in China.

After his visit in Britain, Li Hung Chang visited America. What is worth to be noted here is an interview that documented Li's comments on American politics, especially about the Geary Act: The Chinese Exclusion Act. To set up this interview, Li sent out an invitation for the newspaper reporters to meet him in his reception room.

During the interview, one of the reporters asked, "Does your Excellency expect any modification of the existing Chinese Exclusion act?" In response to this question, Li gave a very strong protest against the Geary Act:

The Chinese Exclusion act is a most unfair law. It is admitted by all political economists that competition will always keep the markets of the world alive and active. This applies to labor as well as to commodities. Do not consider me as a high Chinese official, but as a cosmopolitan; not as a Mandarin, but as a plain citizen of China and of the world, and let me ask what you expect to derive from excluding cheap Chinese labor from America? Cheaper labor means cheaper commodities, and better commodities at lower prices. Your States represent the best type of modern civilization. You are proud of your liberty and your freedom; but is this freedom? This is not liberty, because you are prevented from utilizing cheap labor in your manufactories and on your farms. (New York Times, 1896a)

Political disagreement aside, Li was nonetheless very impressed with American technology. He marveled at the power of the Niagara Construction Company's dynamos and the American railroad system, and wanted to duplicate them in China (New York Times, 1896b). At that time, the new Imperial Postal Service of China has just been established, modelled upon the European method (New York Times, 1896c).

While touring in Europe and America, *Dianshizhai Pictorial* printed two portraits of Li in succession, titled respectively "Portrait of Prime Minister from Hefei" and "Portrait of Prime Minister Li at 74 years old". These portraits presented the rise of Chinese government officials as public figures to be respected or even worshipped by the common people.

Through his visit to Europe and America, Li Hung Chang gained a more profound knowledge of the state of the world and the strength and weakness that China had at the time. This trip strengthened his belief in combining Western science and technology with Chinese natural resources, a belief that continued to exert great influences on Chinese domestic and foreign policies and practices. To understand this influence, we need to go back to a famous event occurred before Li Hung Chang's trip to Europe and America, namely, the Self-Strengthening Movement that aimed to establish strong and independent Chinese military and industrial enterprises.

#### 4. Discussion

In the 1840s, the Chinese government officials believed that all China needed was ships and weapons for its coastal defense. Thus the self-strengtheners' initial purchase list (1860s-1870s) comprised largely of foreign-made weapons and technologies that could be used to suppress the Taiping Rebellion and to arm the navy. As a governor of Shanghai in 1862, Li Hung Chang was a zealous champion of the self-strengthening policy and firmly believed that China's military and financial power could be enhanced through the adoption of Western technology.

A key component in the Self-Strengthening Movement, was the famous debate on the differences and relationship between *Ti* (Essence) and *Yong* (Practical Uses). Feng Guifen (1809-1874) was among the first to argue for an adoption of Western technologies (*yong* 用) for China's national defense, economic development, and industrialization without altering the "Chinese essence (*ti* 体)" (Feng, 1979; Teng & Fairbank, 1979). Wei Yuan's statement "learning from the advanced technologies of the barbarians in order to control them (*shi yi zhi chang ji yi zhi yi* 师夷长技以制夷)" conveyed a similar meaning. The gist of the *Ti* and *Yong* debate can be summarized by the famous slogan "to hold the Chinese principles as the basics and utilize Western science for practical purposes." (*zhong xue wei ti, xi xue wei yong* 中学为体, 西学为用).

But more than many other self-strengtheners, Li made great efforts to introduce Western education as a way to transmit the new science and technology. Li was the first high Qing official who advocated the inclusion of the instruction of Western mathematics and science in Chinese government schools. He also tried to establish Chinese military and industrial enterprises, including the Jiangnan Arsenal, the China Merchants' Steam Navigation Company, and the Pei-yang Navy. However, despite that Li Hung Chang showed quite a level of open-mindedness to Western science and technology, he never truly questioned the Confucian socio-political order. His belief in and commitment to the essence of Chinese tradition commanded his loyalty all the way through his career and remained the source of his personal success and power. His willingness to learn from the West primarily arose his desire to protect the Chinese tradition.

Because of this, he cannot be considered a thorough and determined modernizer, as true modernization demands not the superficial strengthening of state powers such as the army, navy forces and diplomatic corps, but also much

deeper changes within the structure and organization of the government and the society. Like all other advocates of the Self-Strengthening Movement, Li Hung Chang was after all a preserver and protector of the traditional order and society. He rose as a successful Confucian literatus and remained so throughout his life, in spite of fact that he had served in so many other roles as a military strategist, a regional strongman, a state official, and a foreign diplomat. Due to the lack of thorough socio-political reform, the self-strengthening policy that Li Hung Chang advocated and promoted only obtained limited success. At the end of the 19th century, four wars with Japan and the West brought a disastrous end to this policy, which in turn led to Li's eye-opening visit to Europe and America.

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### Notes

Note 1. Li Hung-Chang, "Li Hong-Zhang" in Pinyin, also as "Li Hung Chang; Li Hung-chang."

Note 2. Viceroy Li Hung Chang during his visit to England in 1896, Search from "British Periodical Database (1680-1930)" via University of Pittsburgh Library.

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