# EXCERPTS FROM "OBSERVATIONS ON A TRIP TO AMERICA" By Liang Qichao

#### Introduction

Liang Qichao (1873-1929) was a young colleague and follower of Kang Youwei (1858-1927) during the failed "100 Days Reform" of 1898. When the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) put an end to the reform, Liang narrowly escaped arrest (and certain execution). He settled into exile in Japan, where he pursued a highly influential career as a writer and publisher of journals, including the popular fortnightly *Renewing the People (Xinmin congbao)*, published between 1902 and 1905.

In the document below, Liang presents observations made on his first trip to the United States and Canada, in 1903.

#### **Document Excerpts with Questions** (Longer selection follows this section)

From Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook, edited by Patricia Buckley Ebrey, 2nd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 335-340. ©1993 The Free Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved. [NOTE: This text originally appeared in Land Without Ghosts: Chinese Impressions of America from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present, translated and edited by R. David Arkush and Leo O. Lee (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 84-95.]

# Excerpts from "Observations on a Trip to America" By Liang Qichao

- ... the weaknesses of the Chinese people can be listed as follows:
- 1. Our character is that of clansmen rather than citizens. ... That Chinese can be clansmen but not citizens, I came to believe more strongly after traveling in North America.
  - 2. We have a village mentality and not a national mentality. ...
- 3. We can only accept despotism and cannot enjoy freedom. ... When I look at the societies of the world, none is so disorderly as the Chinese community in San Francisco. Why? The answer is freedom. The character of the Chinese in China is not superior to those of San Francisco, but at home they are governed by officials and restrained by fathers and elder brothers. ...

Now, freedom, constitutionalism, and republicanism mean government by the majority, but the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people are like [those of San Francisco]. If we were to adopt a democratic system of government now, it would be nothing less than committing national suicide. ... To put it in a word, the Chinese people of today can only be governed autocratically. ...

[Translated by R. David Arkush and Leo O. Lee]

#### **Questions:**

- 1. What does Liang Qichao point to as the problem with China?
- 2. How does Liang Qichao's analysis of the causes of Chinese weakness differ from the analyses of the men of the mid- to late- nineteenth century, such as Feng Guifen and Kang Youwei?
- 3. Given Liang's analysis of the Chinese people's flaws as represented here, what sort of political system do you think he would support? What would the goals of government be, from his point of view?
- 4. Can you think of similar arguments about particular groups of people or particular nationalities not being "fit" for democracy and freedom?

#### **Longer Selection**

From Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook, edited by Patricia Buckley Ebrey, 2nd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 335-340. ©1993 The Free Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved. [NOTE: This text originally appeared in Land Without Ghosts: Chinese Impressions of America from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present, translated and edited by R. David Arkush and Leo O. Lee (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 84-95.]

# Excerpts from "Observations on a Trip to America" By Liang Qichao

#### **New York**

Uncivilized people live underground, half-civilized people live on the surface, and civilized people live above the ground. Those who live on surface usually live in one- or two-story houses. ... Some houses in Beijing have entrances going down several stone steps, almost as if going underground. In New York, buildings of ten to twenty stories are not rare, and the tallest reaches thirty-three stories. This can truly be called above the ground. But ordinary residential buildings in big cities in America also have one or two basements, and so are both above and below ground.

Everywhere in New York the eye confronts what look like pigeon coops, spiderwebs, and centipedes; in fact these are houses, electric wires, and trolley cars.

New York's Central Park extends from 71st Street to 123d Street [in fact, 59th to 110th], with an area about equal to the International Settlement and French Concession in Shanghai. Especially on days of rest it is crowded with carriages and people jostling together. The park is in the middle of the city; if it were changed into a commercial area, the land would sell for three or four times the annual revenue of the Chinese government. From the Chinese point of view this may be called throwing away money on useless land and regrettable. The total park area in New York is 7,000 [Chinese] acres, the largest of any city in the world; London is second with 6,500 acres. Writers on city administration all agree that for a busy metropolis not to have appropriate parks is harmful to public health and morals. Now that I have come to New York, I am convinced. One day without going to the park leaves me muddled in mind and spirit.

Every day streetcars, elevated trains, subway trains, horse carriages, automobiles, and bicycles go clitter-clatter above and below, banging and booming to left and right, rumbling and ringing in front and behind. The mind is confused and the soul is shaken. People say that those who live in New York for a long time must have sharper eyes than ordinary people or else they would have to stand at intersections all day, not daring to take a step.

## **Poverty**

New York is the most prosperous city in the world, and also the bleakest. Let me briefly describe New York's darker side.

Anti-Oriental agitators criticize the Chinese above all for their uncleanness. From what I have seen of New York, the Chinese are not the dirtiest. In streets where Italians and Jews live, in the summer old women and young wives, boys and girls, take stools and sit outside their doors, clogging the street. Their clothing is shabby, their appearance wretched. These areas are not accessible by streetcar and even horse-drawn carriages seldom go there. Tourists are always coming to see how they live. From the outside there is building after multistoried building, but inside each building dozens of families are tenants. Over half of the apartments have no daylight or ventilation, and gas lights burn day and night. When you enter, the foul smell assaults your nose. Altogether, in New York about 230,000 people live in such conditions.

According to statistics for 1888, on Houston and Mulberry streets (where most of the people are Italians, with some Germans, Chinese, and Jews), the death rate was 35 per thousand, and 139 per thousand for children under five. In comparison, the overall death rate for New York was 26 per thousand, so the hardship of these poor people can be imagined. These rates, it is said, are due to the lack of air and light where they live. Another statistician says there are 37,000 rented apartments in New York, in which over 1,200,000 people live. Such dwellings are not only unhealthful but also harmful to morality. According to a statistician again, of the 483 people living in one building on a certain street in New York, in one year 102 people committed crimes. So great is the influence of these conditions.

"Crimson mansions reek of wine and meat, while on the road lie frozen bones. Rich and poor but a foot apart; sorrows too hard to relate." So goes Du Fu's poem [Tang dynasty]. I have witnessed such things myself in New York. According to statistics of the socialists, 70 percent of the entire national wealth of America is in the hands of 200,000 rich people, and the remaining 30 percent belongs to 79,800,000 poor. Thus the rich people in America are truly rich, and this so-called wealthy class constitutes no more than one fourhundredth of the population. It can be compared with one hundred dollars being divided among 400 people, with one person getting seventy dollars and the remaining thirty dollars being divided among 399 people, each getting a little over seven cents. How strange, how bizarre! This kind of phenomenon is seen in all civilized countries, particularly in big cities, [but] New York and London are the most notorious. The unequal distribution of wealth has reached this extreme. I look at the slums of New York and think with a sigh that socialism cannot be avoided.

#### J. P. Morgan

This afternoon I went to visit Morgan. Morgan has been called the king of trusts and the Napoleon of the business world. I had no business to discuss with him, but was led by curiosity to meet this man whose magical power is the greatest in America. All his life he has only received guests and never called on others. Even presidents and prime ministers, if they need his help in their nations' financial matters, come to consult him and do not expect him to visit them. I was also told that his appointments are limited to one to five minutes each. Even extremely important problems can be decided in this briefest span of time, so far without error. His energy and acumen are truly unrivaled. I wrote a letter two days ago expressing my wish to request a five-minute conversation. At the appointed time, I went to his Wall Street office to visit him. There were scores of visitors in his receiving room, who were led to see him one by one; no one exceeded five minutes. As I had nothing to ask of him and did not want to waste his precious time, I went in and talked with him for only three minutes. He gave me a word of advice: The outcome of any venture depends on preparations made ahead of time; once it is started, its success or failure is already decided and can no longer be altered. This is the sole motto for his success in life, and I was deeply impressed.

#### The Industrial Trust

In New York City at the turn of the century, a monster was created called the "trust." This monster was born in New York, but its power had spread to all of the United States and is speeding over the whole world. In essence, this monster, whose power far exceeds that of Alexander the Great or Napoleon, is the one and only sovereign of the twentieth-century world. For years I have wanted to find out its true nature; now in New York, I finally have the opportunity. ...

The origins of the trust can be traced to the Oil Trust of 1882, which was the personal creation of [John D.] Rockefeller, known to the world as the petroleum king. Then in 1883, the Cotton Oil Trust was formed, in 1886 the Bread Trust, and in 1887 the Sugar Refining Trust. Their profits were conspicuous and startled all the world. Thenceforth the whole country became crazed about trusts, until today almost 80 percent of the capital of the entire United States is under the control of trusts. The United States today is the premier capitalist nation in the world, and American capital amounts to almost half that of the entire world. Thus somewhat less than half of the world's total capital is now in the hands of this tiny number of trust barons. Alas! How strange! How amazing! In sum, the trust is the darling of the twentieth century, and certainly cannot be destroyed by human effort, as is recognized by all of even the slightest learning. From now on, domestic trusts will grow into international trusts, and the nation that will be most severely victimized will surely be China. It is clear that we cannot look at this problem as if observing a fire from the opposite shore.

# Lynching

Americans have an unofficial form of punishment known as "lynching" with which to treat blacks. Such a phenomenon is unimaginable among civilized countries. It started with a farmer named Lynch. Because he had been offended by a black, he suspended him from a tree to wait for the police officers to arrive, but the black man died before they came. So his name has been used for this ever since. Recently the common practice is burning people to death. Whenever a black has committed an offense a mob will be directly gathered and burn him without going through the courts. Had I only been told about this and not been to America myself I would not have believed that such cruel and inhuman acts could be performed in broad daylight in the twentieth century. During the ten months I was in America I counted no less than ten-odd accounts of this strange business in the newspapers. At first I was shocked, but have become accustomed to reading about it and no longer consider it strange. Checking the statistics on it, there have been an average of 157 such private punishments each year since 1884. Hah! When Russia killed a hundred and some score Jews, the whole world considered it savage. But I do not know how to decide which is worse, America or Russia.

To be sure there is something despicable about the behavior of blacks. They would die nine times over without regret if they could possess a white woman's flesh. They often rape them at night in the forest and then kill them in order to silence them. Nine out of ten lynchings are for this, and it is certainly something to be angry about. Still, why does the government allow wanton lynchings to go unpunished even though there is a judiciary? The reason is none other than preconceived opinions about race. The American Declaration of Independence says that people are all born free and equal. Are blacks alone not people? Alas, I now understand what it is that is called "civilization" these days!

#### Libraries

The various university libraries I have seen do not have people who retrieve books [from the stacks], but let students go and get them on their own. I was amazed. At the University of Chicago, I asked the head of the library whether or not books were lost this way. He answered that about two hundred volumes were lost every year, but hiring several people to supervise the books would cost more than this small number of books and, further, would inconvenience the students. So it is not done. In general, books are lost mostly during the two weeks before examinations because students steal them to prepare for examinations, and many of them are afterwards returned. In this can be seen the general level of public morality. Even a small thing like this is something Orientals could not come close to learning to do in a hundred years.

#### **Chinese Flaws**

From what has been discussed above, the weaknesses of the Chinese people can be listed as follows:

- 1. Our character is that of clansmen rather than citizens. Chinese social organization is based on family and clan as the unit rather than on the individual, what is called "regulating one's family before ruling the country." ... In my opinion, though the power of self-government of the Aryans of the West was developed earlier, our Chinese system of local self-government was just as good. Why is it that they could form a nation-state and we could not? The answer is that what they developed was the city system of self-government, while we developed a clan system of self-government. ... That Chinese can be clansmen but cannot be citizens, I came to believe more strongly after traveling in North America. ...
- 2. We have a village mentality and not a national mentality. I heard Roosevelt's speech to the effect that the most urgent task for the American people is to get rid of the village mentality, by which he meant people's feelings of loyalty to their own town and state. From the point of view of history, however, America has been successful in exercising a republican form of government precisely because this local sentiment was there at the start, and so it cannot be completely faulted. But developed to excess it becomes an obstacle to nation building. ... We Chinese have developed it too far. How could it be just the San Francisco Chinese? It is true everywhere at home, too. ...
- 3. We can accept only despotism and cannot enjoy freedom. ... When I look at all the societies of the world, none is so disorderly as the Chinese community in San Francisco. Why? The answer is freedom. The character of the Chinese in China is not superior to those of San Francisco, but at home they are governed by officials and restrained by fathers and elder brothers. The situation of the Chinese of Southeast Asia would seem different from those in China; but England, Holland, and France rule them harshly, ordering the breakup of assemblies of more than ten people, and taking away all freedoms. This is even more severe than inside China, and so they are docile. It is those who live in North America and Australia who enjoy the same degree of freedom under law as Westerners. In towns where there are few of them, they cannot gather into a force and their defects are not so apparent. But in San Francisco, which leads the list of the free cities with the largest group of Chinese living in the same place, we have seen what the situation is like. ...

With such country men, would it be possible to practice the election system? ... To speak frankly, I have not observed the character of Chinese at home to be superior to those in San Francisco. On the contrary, I find their level of civilization far inferior to those in San Francisco. ... Even if there are some Chinese superior to those in San Francisco, it is just a small matter of degree; their lack of qualification for enjoying freedom is just the same. ...

Now, freedom, constitutionalism, and republicanism mean government by the majority, but the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people are like [those in San Francisco]. If we were to adopt a democratic system of government now, it would be nothing less than committing national suicide. Freedom, constitutionalism, and republicanism would be like hempen clothes in winter or furs in summer; it is not that they are not beautiful, they are just not suitable for us. We should not be bedazzled by empty glitter now; we should not yearn for beautiful dreams. To put it in a word, the Chinese people of today can only be governed autocratically; they cannot enjoy freedom. I pray and yearn, I pray only that our country can

have a Guanzi, a Shang Yang, a Lycurgus, a Cromwell alive today to carry out harsh rule, and with iron and fire to forge and temper our countrymen for twenty, thirty, even fifty years. After that we can give them the books of Rousseau and tell them about the deeds of Washington.

4. We lack lofty objectives. ... This is the fundamental weakness of us Chinese. ... The motives of Europeans and Americans are not all the same, but in my estimation the most important are their love of beauty, concern for social honor, and the idea of the future in their religion. These three are at the root of the development of Western spiritual civilization, and are what we Chinese lack most. ...

There are many other ways in which the Chinese character is inferior to that of Westerners; some happened to impress me so that I recorded them, but others I have forgotten. Let me now list several that I noted down, in no particular order:

Westerners work only eight hours a day and rest every Sunday. Chinese stores are open every day from seven in the morning to eleven or twelve at night, but though shopkeepers sit erect there all day, day in and day out, without rest, they still fail to get as rich as the Westerners. And the work they do is not comparable to the Westerners' in quantity. Why? In any kind of work the worst thing is to be fatigued. If people work all day, all year they are bound to be bored; when they are bored they become tired, and once they are tired everything goes to waste. Resting is essential to human life. That the Chinese lack lofty goals must be due to their lack of rest.

American schools average only 140 days of study a year, and five or six hours every day. But for the same reason as before, Westerners' studies are superior to those of the Chinese.

A small Chinese shop often employs several or more than a dozen people. In a Western shop, usually there are only one or two employees. It may be estimated that one of them does the same amount of work that it takes three of us to do. It is not that the Chinese are not diligent, they are simply not intelligent.

To rest on Sunday is wonderful. After each six days, one has renewed energy. A person's clarity of spirit depends on this. The Chinese are muddle-headed. We need not adopt their Sunday worship, but we should have a program of rest every ten days.

When more than a hundred Chinese are gathered in one place, even if they are solemn and quiet, there are bound to be four kinds of noise: the most frequent is coughing, next come yawning, sneezing, and blowing the nose. During speeches I have tried to listen unobtrusively, and these four noises are constant and ceaseless. I have also listened in Western lecture halls and theaters; although thousands of people were there, I heard not a sound. In Oriental buses and trolleys there are always spittoons, and spitters are constantly making a mess. American vehicles seldom have spittoons, and even when they do they are hardly used. When Oriental vehicles are on a journey of more than two or three hours, more than half of the passengers doze off. In America, even on a full day's journey, no one tries to sleep. Thus can be seen the physical differences between Orientals and Westerners. ...

On the sidewalks on both sides of the streets in San Francisco (vehicles go in the middle of the street), spitting and littering are not allowed, and violators are fined five dollars. On New York trolleys, spitting is prohibited and violators are fined five hundred dollars. Since Chinese are such messy and filthy citizens, no wonder they are despised.

When Westerners walk, their bodies are erect and their heads up. We Chinese bow at one command, stoop at a second, and prostrate ourselves at a third. The comparison should make us ashamed.

When Westerners walk their steps are always hurried; one look and you know that the city is full of people with business to do, as though they cannot get everything done. The Chinese on the other hand walk leisurely and elegantly, full of pomp and ritual—they are truly ridiculous. You can recognize a Chinese walking toward you on the street from a distance of several hundred feet, and not only from his short stature and yellow face.

Westerners walk together like a formation of geese; Chinese are like scattered ducks. When Westerners speak, if they are addressing one person, then they speak so one person can hear; if they are addressing two people, they make two people hear; similarly with ten and with hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands. The volume of their voices is adjusted appropriately. In China, if several people sit in a room to talk, they sound like thunder. If thousands are gathered in a lecture hall, the [speaker's] voice is like a mosquito. When Westerners converse, if A has not finished, B does not interrupt. With a group of Chinese, on the other hand, the voices are all disorderly; some famous scholars in Beijing consider interrupting to be a sign of masterfulness — this is disorderliness in the extreme. Confucius said, "Without having studied the Book of Songs one cannot speak; without having studied the rites, one cannot behave." My friend Xu Junmian also said, "Chinese have not learned to walk and have not learned to speak." This is no exaggeration. Though these are small matters, they reflect bigger things.

[Translated by R. David Arkush and Leo O. Lee]