

[Leigh Jenco](#)

New pasts for new futures: a temporal reading of global thought

**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Jenco, Leigh (2015) *New pasts for new futures: a temporal reading of global thought*. [Constellations](#). pp. 1-32. ISSN 1351-0487 (In Press)

© 2015 [John Wiley & Sons Ltd](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/61242/>

Available in LSE Research Online: March 2015

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

**New Pasts for New Futures:
A Temporal Reading of Global Thought**

Forthcoming in *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*

Leigh Jenco, London School of Economics
Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE United Kingdom
L.K.Jenco@lse.ac.uk

Abstract:

This paper draws upon the work of the syncretic Chinese Marxist Li Dazhao to elaborate an idea of “global thought” which is more than just a localized form of Western knowledge. Li’s work offers both an example, and also a theory, of global thought: his work emerges from the intersection of multiple trajectories of thought with diverse origins, and in the process offers a theory of agency to explain how action in the present renders those trajectories intelligible as lineages which can inspire future innovations. I argue that this opens the possibility for a global thought defined by a plurality of lineages, whose continuities stretch into the history and future of Asia as well as of Europe. I suggest two such lineages for Li’s work here: one links Li’s work to contemporary Chinese responses; the other to scholarship in political and social theory which emphasizes the vitalist role of time in the exercise of agency. These comparisons demonstrate the extent to which global thought such as Li’s transforms where (and when) thinking in the present and future might ground its arguments, and from which historical materials it might draw its resources.

Acknowledgements:

I presented an earlier version of this paper at the conference *Power in the Making* at Oxford University; as a seminar at the Institute for Political Thought, Academia Sinica, Taiwan; and at a meeting of the London Comparative Political Theory Research Group. I wish to thank audiences at all these venues for their comments, especially: Andrew Kipnis, Rana Mitter, Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, Tia Thornton, Carl K.Y. Shaw, Duan Lian, Tsai Ying-wen, Humeira Iqtidar, Carlo Bonura, Ernest Caldwell, and especially David Strand. I would also like to thank Lea Ypi and Elisa Piras, who read a revised version.

This paper conceptualizes and defends a distinctive form of global thought by examining the work of Li Dazhao (1888-1927), well-known as “China’s first Marxist” but whose diverse contributions to historiography and social theory are relatively overlooked. This global thought is distinctive in that it does not merely take the global as an object of reference or concern, as do many theories of cosmopolitanism or globalization. Rather, it considers the methods by which thought itself builds upon ideas and processes which are global in lineage, and the implications for its substantive claims when it does so. Li’s work is relevant here precisely because it both enables and exemplifies this mode of global thought. He *enables* this mode through offering a theory of time as an ontological, non-human force that shapes, but also makes possible, human efforts to change their political and social worlds. This theory of time, as I will argue below, authorizes a particular form of agency to combine and redirect otherwise dispersed lineages of thought toward new futures. Here, Li *exemplifies* this mode of global thought by drawing on a wide range of traditions to think about how action in the present transforms both our shared future trajectories as well as our past lineages. Using Li’s own theory of agency, we can see that Li does not simply inflect putatively universal traditions with local particularity—that is, he cannot be said to simply “sinicize Marxism,” or even to “provincialize Europe,”¹ precisely because his theory shows that such lineages do not track some past heritage with given content. It is the lineages themselves which become ordered and intelligible—and indeed potentially more “universal”—through his interventions.

This paper thus works with and from, but also on, Li’s ideas: “global thought” is my conceptualization of how Li’s work might be understood through his own theory of agency, as well as how it might be generalized to theorize new relationships between time, agency, and the material and conceptual connectivities associated with globalized life. Acting in and

¹ Maurice J Meisner, *Li Ta-Chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

through time as Li suggests, I situate Li's own thought as global: I do this not only by exploring the character of his global influences, but also and more importantly by showing how his work orients two different and typically unrelated trajectories of thought. His vitalist, material understanding of time draws him close to contemporary and current scholarship influenced by Marxism and Darwinism, even as his insistence on the efficacy of self-cultivation evokes neo-Confucian commitments to world-ordering. However, and again following Li's own recommendations, I suggest that these trajectories do not determine Li's thought, so much as our reading of Li's thought determines how we view such trajectories. This reading clarifies some interpretive problems that have plagued scholarship on Li Dazhao and his Chinese contemporaries, which like much thought from colonial or semi-colonial societies tends to be imperfectly understood when read as a repository of poorly digested Western ideas. More importantly, however, it shows that global thought such as Li's comes into being at the intersection of multiple trajectories of thought circulating in diverse spaces, even as it acts to render those trajectories intelligible as lineages of present thought and action. In other words, Li's thought transforms not only the future production of knowledge, but also how we identify and organize those resources from the past which are seen to inform it. In my conclusion, I consider how this re-orientation enhances the capacity of globally diffuse yet typically marginalized ("non-Western") thought to shape present and future knowledge-production. Establishing or maintaining continuities with this thought resists the historical ruptures which confine it to the spaces of the "traditional" or even "historical," and so validates its relevance to our knowledge in the present and future.

Time and Agency

Li Dazhao and his contemporaries faced a world of constant change. The revolution of 1911 ended the nearly three-hundred-year-old Qing dynasty, establishing republican

government for the first time in China's history. The instability which accompanied the new regime, marked by the threat of Euro-American imperialism as well as domestic fragmentation and economic collapse, intensified ongoing efforts by intellectuals to make sense of China's future within a global order now centered outside its borders.² By the end of the Qing, growing recognition of China as just one part of a broader world encouraged many reformers to frame China as a stage or site of *da tong*, an immanent "great commonality" constituted by the interdependent causation of all things in the cosmos.³ Intellectuals were particularly drawn to Western scholarship which offered explanations for China's past failures and schemes for improving its future in terms of its place within a global milieu, such as social Darwinism, evolutionary theory, and, increasingly, critiques of capitalist industrial development.

Li Dazhao was the most theoretically sophisticated of those who articulated the ways in which human actions might respond to and embody such cosmic interdependency, extending the *da tong* concepts of an earlier generation to consider how agents might act within, while transforming, the geopolitical reality they confronted. His academic and popular work over a period of more than a decade specified this problem as how time bridges human action and history. His early essays, written before his encounter with Marxism in the late 1910s, encourage young people to orient themselves to the open-ended future through cultivating their youthful, "springtime" sensibilities. Their imagery of seasonal renewal and self-cultivation reflects Li's education in Confucian texts and lifelong interest in Daoism; their call to politically transform the future encourages acceptance of the European and American ideas that since the 1840s had been transmitted to China through Japan. Time

² Luke S. K. Kwong, "The Rise of the Linear Perspective on History and Time in Late Qing China c. 1860-1911," *Past & Present* no. 173 (November 1, 2001): 157-190; Xiaobing Tang, *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity: the Historical Thinking of Liang Qichao* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1996).

³ Charlotte Furth, "Intellectual Change: From the Reform Movement to the May Fourth Movement, 1895-1920," in *An Intellectual History of Modern China*, ed. Merle Goldman and Leo Ou-fan Lee (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 16.

reappears again as Li interprets the concepts of Marxist historical materialism for Chinese audiences. His ruminations culminate in his 1924 masterwork *Shi xue yao lun* (*Essentials of Historical Study*), written while serving as a history professor at Beijing University.

Li conceptualizes time as an ontological condition of existence that encapsulates the “now” within a dynamic and unevenly emergent past and future. The agency that he sees as enabled by time involves coming to terms with the ontological capacities of time to both discipline and enable human action in the present. These capacities inaugurate a new world which effectively reorients future possibilities for action, as well as transforms history, by refiguring our relation to the past. For Li, agency—the capacity to act efficaciously within environments shared by other human and non-human forces—was underwritten by the power to transform whole epochs of shared history through the narration of selective pasts, the mobilization of present energies, and the propulsion of human will through open-ended, evolutionary time. In this sense, Li’s agency enacts what recent political theorists have called an “event,” “which dislodge[s] the anticipations and expectations that we have in regard to the future.”⁴

Importantly, however, Li insists that agency does not constitute a rupture in what has gone before; actors must abide by the continuity presented by the ceaseless flow of time, when the “now” perpetually presents itself as a moment of action. In a 1918 essay titled “Now” (*jin*, lit., “currentness,” or “presentness”) Li situates human actions within a stretch of historical time that carries with it an ever-growing accumulation of ideas from the past, even as that same movement of time also makes possible infinite transformations in the future—and, indeed, also of the past:

⁴ Michelle Bastian, “Inventing Nature: Re-writing Time and Agency in a More-than-Human World,” *Australian Humanities Review* 47 (2009): 110.

The actions from an age do not disappear, but still remain within the next age; and in this way being transmitted infinitely, [those actions] are imbued with a linking to the infiniteness of the world. . . . Limitless ‘pasts’ all take ‘now’ as their point of refuge; and limitless ‘futures’ all take ‘now’ as their source.⁵

Li goes on to explain that it is the ‘now’ that completes the linkage between past and future, comprising the “great reality” (*da shizai*) that is eternity, marked by its lack of either beginning or end.⁶ Therefore, the past is not “dead,” because time and its history is “the process of human life, the continuation of human life, the transformations of human life, the transmissions of human life; it is a thing with a life, a living thing, a progressive thing, a developing thing, a circulating and changing thing.”⁷

Influenced by the French philosopher Henri Bergson, but also by the philosophy of cosmological transience articulated in the ancient Chinese divination text the *Yijing* (*Book of Changes*), Li portrays time as a living force which enjoys its own self-propelled dynamism. Time is “an open-ended becoming,” to use the description Elizabeth Grosz offers for the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin.⁸ Human agents who desire the power to act efficaciously in such a world must therefore consider not only the actions and concerns of other humans, but also the vitalist force that is time. By placing ourselves within the unceasing “torrent” of reality that time presents to us, we must learn to shape our goals and expectations in ways that can be served by and blend with time:

⁵ Dazhao Li, “Jin (Now),” *Xin Qingnian* 4, no. 4 (April 15, 1918): 533; All page number citations from Li are taken from *Li Dazhao Wenji* (*Collected Works of Li Dazhao*), 2 vols. (Beijing: Renmin chu ban she, 1984).

⁶ Li, “Jin,” 533.

⁷ Dazhao Li, *Shi Xue Yao Lun* (*Essentials of Historical Study*), Bai Ke Xiao Congshu 51 (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1924), 713.

⁸ E. A. Grosz, ed., *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 3; Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2007).

We can say that the torrent of “great reality” perpetually races from a beginningless reality to an endless reality. Our self, our life, also perpetually blends with all the trends of life, following the current of great reality, so as to create breadth, continuity (*duan xu*), evolutionary transformation (*jin zhuan*), and development. Therefore, reality is movement; life is flow (*liu zhuan*).⁹

Having the power to take action in the present, to Li, therefore takes on a particular shape that is necessarily rather than coincidentally related to time. In this passage, he reflects both Bergson’s notion of “duration,” which, like the *Book of Changes*, confronts time as “the unceasing creation, the uninterrupted up-surge of novelty.”¹⁰ For Li as for Bergson, “in duration, considered as a creative evolution, there is perpetual creation of possibility and not only of reality.”¹¹ Human beings are not constrained by time, as agents are constrained by structures; but nor are they masters of time. Rather, they are part of the life that constitutes time, and vice-versa. In the *Changes* and its commentaries, the specific content of our actions, and the exercise of our power, appears similarly within the infinite and ceaseless condition of “backing and forthing” emblemized in the four seasons.¹² Li follows Jin Shengtan, the late Ming-early Qing literary commentator, to understand the *Changes*’ concepts of *zhou* and *yi* as “constancy” (*chang wang*) and “transformation” (*bian yi*) in a ceaseless process of renewal (*ri ri xin*).¹³ For Li, embracing this succession of time involves creating breadth, continuity, progressive transformation, and development, which shifts the emphasis to innovation

⁹ Li, “Jin,” 534.

¹⁰ Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 7; For discussion of Bergson’s influence on Li, see Meisner, *Li Ta-Chao*, 21–8, 48–9.

¹¹ Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 10.

¹² Hiroyuki 近藤浩之 Kondō, “Yi Chuan Zhong ‘Bian Tong,’ ‘Qu Shi’ de Sixiang,” in *Zhongguo Wenxue Lishi Yu Sixiang Zhong de Guannian Bianqian Guoqi Xueshu Yantaohui Lunwen Ji* (Taiwan Daxue wenxue yuan, 2005), 46–7.

¹³ Dazhao Li, “Spring,” trans. Hsien-yi Yang and Gladys Yang, *Chinese Literature Monthly* 5 (May 1959): 11–18; discussed in Binggang 颜炳罡 Yan, “Li Dazhao Yi Xue Sixiang Jiqi Zaoqi Zhexue 李大钊易学思想及其早期哲学,” *Zhou Yi Yanjiu 周易研究* 5 (2007): 82–3.

through time rather than the cycling or repetition of past practices. Our capacities to act should therefore focus on jiving with temporal rhythms we can sense but cannot control, which we can embody but not always definitively direct.

This claim is not only descriptive, but normative. In his 1919 essay “Material Changes and Changes in Morality,” often heralded as his first exploration of Marxist historical materialism, Li explicitly frames moral dilemmas about right and wrong not in ethical or even cultural terms, but in temporal ones.¹⁴ Solving them means aligning them along axes of old/new and change/permanence, rather than mapping them onto contemporary divisions between China and the West which divorce Chinese history from global modes of time. Li claims his essay is motivated by recent complaints, in wake of both the revolution of 1911 and the May Fourth movement (ca.1919-1927, which called for a more thoroughgoing embrace of “Western” values of scientific inquiry and democracy) that the old ways are gone but the new ones have not yet been established. This period of historical uncertainty poses a unique dilemma, because it fails to give clear signals about what, if anything, are the most appropriate ethical ways of acting at this time. Many people, Li says, seem to think that morality is something that can and should be out of sync with its times: although materially we should always aim for the new, morality should always be rooted in the old. Material conditions may change, these people say, but morality should stay the same; it is more important to focus on the old in this case than to chase after the new.¹⁵

In this essay Li uses Darwin to locate the theoretical foundations of morality in our social contexts,¹⁶ but looks to Marx to explain how and why morality differs over time and place.¹⁷ These theories show, Li argues, that morality follows changes in social conditions,

¹⁴ Dazhao Li, “Wuzhi Biandong Yu Daode Biandong (Material Changes and Morality Changes),” *Xin Chao* 2, no. 2 (December 1, 1919): Reprinted in Li Dazhao Wenji, vol. 2, 134–152.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 136–8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

so that if society regresses so too will its moral codes. But even this kind of turning-back is not really best understood as a revival of the old, but rather the resurgence of the new:

...the great path of social transformation (*jin hua*) is a continuously cumulative great flow; there is only going forward, there is never looking back; there is only opening to the new, never reviving the old; during those times that the old is destroyed, the new rises up again. This is a rebirth, a re-creation; you cannot in any way say this is a revival of the old. Material conditions, morality—neither has any logic of ‘reviving the old!’¹⁸

Being moral, for Li, amounts to being timely, in both senses: timeliness entails action that deals forthrightly with the ontological reality of time’s flow, as well as actions that fit one’s era. To Li, the revolutionary promise which gripped his contemporaries since the 1911 Revolution should not be grounded on a rupture from the past, but on continuity with it.¹⁹ He therefore distanced himself from calls by radical iconoclasts, such as his friend and sometime editor Chen Duxiu, to obliterate all forms of traditional thought in China. At the same time, conservative attempts to preserve the present—or revive the past—contradict the ceaseless “flow” of life surging ever onward. Joseph Levenson would echo similar sentiments half a century later, when he argued that traditionalism is necessarily “a completely hypothetical, self-destructive concept; a sense of the past can never develop if an original unmitigated reverence for ‘what is’ precludes its ever becoming past.”²⁰ As Li explains elsewhere, “Even

¹⁸ Ibid., 151–2.

¹⁹ I therefore differ from Duranti’s interpretation of Li’s historiography as affirming “paradigmatic breaks” in history; see Michela Duranti, “Li Dazhao’s Historical Vision in *Shixue Yao Lun*” (presented at the Across and Beyond: The Regeneration of May Fourth Scholarship from Transnational and Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives, Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University, 2010), 8–9.

²⁰ Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), xxxi.

if we concede that the road of historical is cyclical, this cycle also tracks forward movement, it is not a kind of turning back.”²¹

Under these conditions, our activities may be understood as what, in a 1923 essay that exhibits marked continuity with these early ruminations, Li calls the “extension” (*yin*) of the line of time, a power which exists only in this present moment, where “the limitless future gestates”:

They say time is like a line, extending out ever longer, and once extended it orders all the points between the past and now. But to use this metaphor to explain the succession of time isn’t really reasonable. Because this line, once extended, belongs entirely to the past; and before it is extended, exists in the future; but where is the point of now situated?²²

This passage indicates Li’s commitment to a truly continuous flow of time; the present is not conceived as a point from which the past and future emanate, so much as a moment in which human action contributes and directs to the movement of time forward. Agency thus “emerges in the process of becoming, not in the mysterious movements between” states of being.²³ Li goes on to explain,

The movement of this line in reality must have a force (*li*) behind it, before the extension can be manifest, as it goes from the past, and heads toward the future. The movement of this force is precisely the action (*xingwei*) of this extension; and the action of this extension lies precisely in the moment of now.... If a moment has no

²¹ Dazhao Li, “Shi (Time),” *Chenbao* Fifth Anniversary Supplement (December 1, 1923): 669.

²² *Ibid.*, 666.

²³ Stephanie Clare, “Agency, Signification, and Temporality,” *Hypatia* 24, no. 4 (October 2009): 59.

action, and makes no movement, then the now of this moment returns to non-existence; the life of this moment is nothing more than a loss.²⁴

These passages help to situate Li vis-à-vis the Marxist historical materialism with which he is often associated, even as the inevitability of time's flow—marked, it seems, by ongoing transformations of material and economic conditions—grounds a peculiar and distinctly non-Marxist claim about human agency. In essays such as “My Views on Marxism” and “Material Changes and Changes in Morality,” Li claims outright that thought, “isms,” philosophy, religion, morality, and law are unable to restrain material and economic changes.²⁵ The arrow of this relationship only goes one way: economics and material conditions can wreak changes in ideational structures.²⁶ However, Li points out the contradiction between Marx's belief that productive forces are the motive power of history, versus claiming that all history is that of class struggle.²⁷ Li interprets Marx's mandate for a future socialism as calling for the promotion of ethical correction and the cultivation of humanist (*rendao*) movements in the present, in order to eliminate the bad habits and evil natures that humans have received from past history. You cannot wait for materialist changes, Li insists, and this is a point where Marxist theory needs to be corrected. Instead,

We advocate using humanism to create a humanist spirit (*renlei jingshen*), and at the same time to use socialism to change economic organization. Without changing economic organization, and to seek only to change a humanist spirit, would be

²⁴ Li, “Shi (Time),” 666.

²⁵ Dazhao Li, “Wo de Makesi Zhuyi Guan (My Views on Marxism),” *Xin Qingnian* 6, no. 5–6 (November 1919): Reprinted in Li Dazhao Wenji, vol. 2: 46–85. The title of this essay is typically translated as “My Marxist Views.” However, as Wu Shu-chin has pointed out, this inaccurately suggests that Li endorses Marxism in the essay; see Shu-chin Wu, “Li Dazhao and the Rise of Modern Chinese Radicalism” (PhD dissertation, The University of Wisconsin - Madison, 2005); Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History: The Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 27.

²⁶ Li, “Wuzhi Biandong,” 139.

²⁷ Li, “Wo de Makesi Zhuyi Guan,” 63.

ineffective. But not to change economic organization, and to seek only to change the humanist spirit, would also unfortunately be unsuccessful. We advocate simultaneous changes to both the material and spiritual, heart and matter at the same time.²⁸

Li concludes on the basis of this relationship between material forces and reality that we must craft a morality that suits our new situation, “a morality of people, beauty, practicality, great commonality (*da tong*), mutual aid, and creativity!” to satisfy the demands of a materially interconnected age.²⁹ The earlier Chinese reform ideal of *da tong*, reached through a long process of humanist cultivation in both self and society, here reworks historical materialism to produce a dialectical and mutually dependent process of social transformation. Like many of his intellectual colleagues—including Liang Qichao and Zhang Shizhao—Li theorizes a reform strategy which tacks between the internal human effort often associated with moral renovation, on the one hand, and changes in the external, material world associated with political and economic institutions, on the other.³⁰ His activism embodies this dual commitment by resisting a unilateral strategy which turns solely on social revolution or a long wait for transformation in the means of production.³¹ In contrast to Marxist historiography, which tends to read time as a series of strategic points, Li emphasizes instead the potential of the present moment, each “now” promising a fugitive moment for action that alone can engender the future.³²

These considerations help us understand how Li’s idea of “extension,” mentioned above, comprises a unique and dynamic theory of agency. To borrow phrasing from Diana

²⁸ Ibid., 68. This synthesis maps on also to his earlier call for a blending of “Eastern” and “Western” civilizations, in which Western materialism and activism is tempered by the spirituality and humanism of the East: Dazhao Li, “Dong Xi Wenming Genben de Yi Dian (The Fundamental Differences Between Eastern and Western Civilizations),” *Yan Zhi* 3 (July 1918): 60.

²⁹ Li, “Wuzhi Biantong,” 152.

³⁰ See Leigh Jenco, “‘Rule by Man’ and ‘Rule by Law’ in Early Republican China: Contributions to a Theoretical Debate,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 1 (February 2010): 181–203 for more discussion of this tendency in early Republican thought.

³¹ Meisner, *Li Ta-Chao*, 49.

³² Ibid., 169.

Coole, Li recognizes that human power to transform shared environments is a capacity immanent to the socio-temporal field which remains constantly in the process of becoming.³³ Li's point in his early essays, as well as in "My Views on Marxism," is not to render time a deterministic force which acts against human actions to change their circumstances. Rather, he inscribes time as one force that concatenates with others (economic, material, etc.) to make human agency possible. As Li's own theory of history argues, however, this agency acts not only upon the present and future, but also upon the past. In what follows, I show that by bringing together otherwise dispersed lineages of thought and action, such as neo-Confucian and materialist modes of social reform, Li necessarily redraws the lines through which present thought and future innovation might be made intelligible and legitimate.

Time and Agency in History

These ideas are given richer and more sustained elaboration in Li's masterwork of historiography, *Essentials of Historical Study*. It is in this work that Li's theory of agency grounds a theory of history, to explain how thought such as his own can be seen as properly global rather than merely syncretic. *Essentials* struggles with the realization that present actions transform not only future outcomes, but also the way in which we view the past—the ongoing transformations Li associates with human agency, in other words, repeatedly and paradoxically *change* history, rather than are marked by it. On this basis, Li's drawing together of neo-Confucian, Darwinian, materialist and other commitments can be redescribed as an intervention in history: they change not only the nature of thought in the present, but also the way in which that thought might be situated in time, as belonging to the past of particular communities or individuals rather than others. In my discussion above, my recourse to a variety of alternative descriptions that both pre- and post-date Li (e.g., to Grosz

³³ Diana Coole, "Rethinking Agency: A Phenomenological Approach to Embodiment and Agentic Capacities," *Political Studies* 53, no. 1 (March 1, 2005): 138, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9248.2005.00520.x.

as well as Jin) gestures toward the kind of diverse, global sources necessary to render Li's thought legible. In this and the following section, I elaborate on Li's theory of history to show how it explains these sources in terms of lineages which inform, even as they are created by, interventions in the present. We are then in a better position to understand his thought as "global," in that it inaugurates—even as it must be understood in terms of—not one but multiple trajectories, which arise from diverse regions of the world to inform conversations that are no longer local in either scope or character.

Essentials portrays history as an evolving (rather than unfurling) narrative about human life activity.³⁴ "What is living history, true history?" Li asks. "Speaking simply, history is human life and the culture it produces"—an inexhaustible totality, whose "facts" (*shi shi*) are vivid, alive, and ceaselessly changing:³⁵

So-called historical facts are facts in the process of being interpreted. Interpretations are alive, and contain progressiveness. Therefore historical facts are also alive, and contain progressiveness. Simply having a complete set of materials does not qualify as a historical reality; you must have a complete interpretation before [something] can be considered a historical reality. And a historical reality is something temporary, which is determined by the times and changes with the times; it is not fast-and-hard. Historical realities are of two kinds: one that says that materials about an event that has occurred are correct; and the other that says an interpretation about an event that has occurred are correct. The first changes relatively rarely; the latter changes with the times. Interpretations are knowledge with respect to facts, and knowledge increases and expands every day, so therefore interpretations change every day. There is also a

³⁴ My choice of terms here invokes Bergson's distinction between "evolution"—the eruption of the radically new—and "unfurling"—the re-arrangement of the pre-existing. See Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 10.

³⁵ Li, *Shi Xue Yao Lun*, 714–5, 717 On the basis of the holistic nature of the life activity history documents, Li calls for the formation of a new field of inquiry called "humanistic study" (*ren wen xue*) (734).

real past, and a historical past: the real past is over, dead, gone; the past event is done, finished; past persons are gone in an instant, and can never come back; expecting any change from them is forever impossible. That which can be expanded and enlarged is not the past itself, but our knowledge about the past.³⁶

Li's insistence that the facts of history change constantly reflects his view that facts are themselves the product of new histories, which are constantly being created and as such remain beyond definitive anticipation. As the present changes, so too does the past, a transformation Li associates with positive progress toward truth.³⁷ Although he insists that the growth of a "science" of history requires the search and discovery of certain "general principles" (*li fa*) by the historian, "the reality of history is always in development, in progress; there is no history that is complete." This means that conclusions reached are always tentative, such that "recorded history must also be ceaselessly modified."³⁸

Here Li departs markedly from Liang Qichao's views on historiography, put forward around the turn of the century, which according to Tang Xiaobing identified history with "reorganizing the past as a rational, collective experience around a reinvented agency" of the nation-state.³⁹ Li's point is rather to emphasize the emergent, uncertain character of social development—seeing it as an open-ended evolution whose jagged unfolding is made possible through human agency, rather than a teleological movement toward a fixed goal that societies perpetually lag behind. Wu Shu-chin has ascribed Li's resistance to Darwinian notions of social progress to his awareness of China's place within a larger world. As victims of

³⁶ Ibid., 717–8.

³⁷ Ibid., 719.

³⁸ Ibid., 728. My translation here of *li fa* as "general principles" rather than "laws" in the causal, scientific sense reflects an emerging Darwinist reading of the life sciences as radically indeterminate, recognizing that exact prediction or precise calculation are inadequate to the complexity of reality. In affirming the irreducible unpredictability of the future, this more recent reading seems closer in meaning to what Li intended. See Grosz, *Nick of Time*, 21.

³⁹ Tang, *Global Space*, 34.

imperialism in a progressive universe, the Chinese would be helpless to overcome their oppression.⁴⁰ In contrast, by emphasizing the role of human agency and the cosmically unfolding rather than progressive nature of time, Li enables the participation of all people in fostering a global tide of change toward a more peaceful future.⁴¹

This global participation turns crucially on the agency promised by Li's theory of history. Just as unreflective human actions create history, so too (and to a greater degree) do reflective attempts to study it. In fact, Li inscribes historical research as an important form of action with the power to transform society positively. He compares the examination of past segments of history to the climbing of a tall building, which holds layers and layers of accumulated human experience. "Only by ascending to the very top, can the horizons of limitless futures and the inexhaustible visions of human life be seen with a bit greater clarity."⁴² Becoming in tune with events as they occur, we develop a self-awareness that

leads us to discover within history our own world, our own selves, making us aware of our own power (*quan wei*), knowing that past history is precisely what everyone (*ren ren*) has created, and that the history that spans from now to the future is also of this nature.⁴³

Li's vision of agency recognizes that history changes every day alongside the future. To think that the ancient past is somehow ahead of us, and the yet-to-come is somehow behind us, Li argues, is to contradict the reality of the development of great nature and great reality; the start of our history "lies not in the ancients, but in the present; it hastens not toward the broad

⁴⁰ Wu, "Li Dazhao and the Rise of Modern Chinese Radicalism," 128.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

Meisner, *Li Ta-Chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism*.

⁴² Li, *Shi Xue Yao Lun*, 763.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 764.

and limitless past, but toward the broad and limitless future.”⁴⁴ This “living history” fosters an alternative, future-oriented and open-ended trajectory which is always changing, based on syntheses and connections made in the present.⁴⁵

As this discussion of Li’s thought reveals, his work is always-already global: not only does it source ideas from a variety of geographical areas, but he also thinks carefully about how thought must change to reflect our participation in a flow of time now seen to be shared by everyone around the world, rather than centered within a particular society or nation. In what follows, I illustrate how his thought is also global in a third, more complex sense, suggested by Li’s own theory of agency: its syncretism does not simply concatenate discrete ideas, but brings into view continuities which connect particular, sometimes geographically specific lineages of thought to the global theory of the future. I suggest two such lineages here, which Li’s work both calls into being and extends in new ways. One links Li’s work to contemporary and ongoing intellectual responses within the Chinese political context; the other to scholarship in political and social theory which emphasizes the vitalist role of time in the exercise of agency. These comparisons are not intended to exhaust the content of Li’s thought; rather, they demonstrate the extent to which his appropriation of ideas from places such as Europe and Japan is an act of agency—an event which transforms not only Li’s own present and future contexts, but also enacts a global thought which is more than just a localized form of Western knowledge. As I will show, this perspective resolves certain interpretive problems specific to Li himself, but more importantly demonstrates new ways in which global thought might come to be defined by plural lineages, whose continuities in his case stretch into the history and future of Asia as well as of Europe.

Li’s Multiple Trajectories

⁴⁴ Li, “Shi (Time),” 668.

⁴⁵ Li, *Shi Xue Yao Lun*, 718; c.f. Bergson’s “The Possible and the Real,” *The Creative Mind*, 84.

Like his contemporaries, Li sought a means by which human agents could hasten forward the very history that seemed to be holding them back—whether that history turns on a narrative of industrial development and modernization, Darwinian natural selection, Marxist stages that culminate in thorough social revolution, or a combination of these. The problem itself exhibits marked continuity with late Qing (circa 1890s) conceptualizations of historical progress and human action, in which “the ultimate source of being is no longer viewed as a refuge but as the source of a kind of infinite propulsive energy breaking through all the confining structures of human history and finally leading men to an ultimate deliverance on both the societal and individual levels.”⁴⁶ These visions of action and progress expressed a neo-Confucian ethic, drawn from the earlier classical text *The Great Learning*, which urged readers to “cultivate oneself, order the family, govern the state, and bring peace to all-under-Heaven.”⁴⁷ In most interpretations of this ethic, which formed a central part of Confucian orthodoxy since the fourteenth century, efficacious political activity was seen as constitutive, rather than a precondition for, the proper channeling of this energy from one’s self to one’s society and beyond. At the same time, such channeling both presupposed and fashioned a particular kind of subjectivity.

Until the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911, that subjectivity was construed as a ritually disciplined scholar-official. Under the republic, it was replaced by an image of a self-aware, national citizen oriented in the right way to the right kinds of worldly circumstances (in Li’s case, the ontological conditions of time). These visions often produced a well-noted tension between the ongoing rectification of consciousness by late imperial literati as well as republican citizens, on the one hand, and their repeated inability to produce the outer world they meant to secure, on the other—in the process engendering an anxiety-inducing failure to

⁴⁶ Benjamin Schwartz, “Themes in Intellectual History: May Fourth and After,” in *An Intellectual History of Modern China*, ed. Merle Goldman and Leo Ou-fan Lee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 118.

⁴⁷ Xi Zhu, *Si shu ji zhu* (Taipei: Taiwan Zhonghua shu ju, 1965). *The Great Learning* was a fourteenth-century extraction from the ancient classical text the *Li ji* (*Book of Rites*).

“escape from predicament.”⁴⁸ By the early Republic, even visions of explicitly democratic agency continued to be wracked by such tensions, framed as they were in terms of typically literati activities such as participating in local self-government, partaking in some kind of moral self-cultivation, and engendering elite concern for the masses. Political thinkers such as Liang Qichao as well as Li’s colleague Zhang Shizhao characterized democratic political action as a process that, at least in part, consisted of ruling oneself before one could effectively joining others in ruling.⁴⁹

Zhang’s formulation of such agency bears an instructive similarity to Li Dazhao’s approach here. In a series of essays (many written for the *Tiger Magazine*, a leading opinion journal Zhang edited and for which Li Dazhao was a frequent contributor), Zhang called for a new vision of “self-awareness” appropriate to self-ruling citizens. Zhang identifies self-awareness as the realization by the people that “the power to rise up in anger to chasten and admonish [their rulers] abides in their own selves.”⁵⁰ For Zhang as for Li, and indeed as for many neo-Confucians before them, we gain traction on a dynamic external environment through the rectification of our consciousness, through viewing things the right way. In an early essay addressed to his youthful colleagues in the New Culture movement, many of whom would go on to participate in the May Fourth demonstrations of 1919 to urge a remaking of China’s social culture, Li offers a vivid picture of what such agency might entail:

We who are young and hot-blooded, standing in this great, whirling current should have fortitude and independent will to stand firm, resisting the current’s force,

⁴⁸ Thomas A. Metzger, *Escape from Predicament : neo-Confucianism and China’s Evolving Political Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

⁴⁹ Qichao Liang, “On Self-Rule,” in *Yin Bing Shi Quan Ji (Collected Works from the Ice-Drinker’s Studio)* (Taipei: Wenhua Book Co., 1989); Zhang Shizhao, “Zi jue” (Self-awareness), in Zhang Shizhao, “Guojia Yu Wo (The State and the Self),” in *Zhang Shizhao Quan Ji, Vol. 3* (Shanghai: Wen hui chu ban she, 2000), 202. It is worth noting, however, that each differed with respect to how individualized such activity could and should be.

⁵⁰ Zhang, “Zi jue,” 202; discussed in Leigh Jenco, *Making the Political: Founding and Action in the Political Theory of Zhang Shizhao* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 152.

remaining consistent in a changing world. Then we can identify ourselves with the universe, our springtime with the springtime of the universe....

Let us who are young stand firm as a rock in mid-stream and, taking now as the middle point [in history]; let us consign all old histories to the flames, develop our national virtues, and write a glorious opening page in modern history.⁵¹

Although a somewhat hyperbolic expression of what he would do at a more mature stage elaborate in less evocative and more academic terms, Li's call to youth to preserve eternal spring suggests that we come to terms with our environment, and inaugurate reform, through transformations in our own understanding of where and how we are situated cosmologically. For Li in 1916, China as the "central kingdom" must be recognized as central not only in space but also in time: according to Fabio Lanza, Li's "Spring" places China's young people "in the middle of a global and coeval political time," in which "a specific historical situation—that of expanding capitalism, colonialism, and national revolution" is refigured as "the shared possibility of a future that would be potentially universal."⁵²

Zhang's approach is structurally similar but its focus is different; he attends to the relationship between our personal selves and other, differently situated selves as we come to recognize our shared capacities for world-changing activity. Zhang urges us to recognize that "external things and the self are mutually corresponding, such that it would be totally ridiculous to speak only of things and not of the self, to speak only of the self and not of things. Therefore, if there are no 'selves,' there can be no country."⁵³ In this way, the process

⁵¹ Li, "Spring," 13, 15.

⁵² Fabio Lanza, "Springtime and Morning Suns: 'Youth' as a Political Category in Twentieth-century China," *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 5, no. 1 (2012): 40, doi:10.1353/hcy.2012.0014.

⁵³ Jenco, *Making the Political*, 152.

of gaining self-awareness constitutes, and not merely supplements or grounds, the actions of a properly democratic actor, even as it is self-awareness that makes democracy possible.⁵⁴

An important contrast between Li and Zhang, then, lies in their characterization of what it is we are gaining consciousness of, and how exactly our consciousness comes to make a difference for our external, shared environment. How is it that we come to have the power to do what we hope to accomplish? A central point for Li is that political actors who seek the power to change society must recognize that the context in which they act extends unpredictably and irreducibly to both the past and future, which are increasingly interpreted as coeval with globally and cosmically shared time. This orientation is better exemplified by the universalist utopian vision of Tan Sitong in his 1898 reformist tract *Ren xue* (Study of Benevolence), which like Li emphasized the future as a time of political and moral deliverance, mediated by human beings who take account of the materialist forces of time acting with and through them.⁵⁵ In fact, in his 1923 essay “Time,” Li criticizes Zhang and Liang explicitly for assuming an unreflectively cyclical, and paradoxically regressive, view of time that both elides the inevitable progression of time and disables the transformative possibilities of the future.⁵⁶

On this point Li’s ideas dovetail with an emerging literature on political agency that situates human power within a range of non-human material conditions. In the words of theorist Elizabeth Grosz, for this “new materialist” approach, matter or nature “is construed as a force, provocation, activity, or incitement, rather than, as is the current fashion in feminist and cultural studies, where nature is considered an inert passivity onto which life, culture, and the human impose themselves.”⁵⁷ Like Li, these new materialists draw on

⁵⁴ Zhang, “Zi jue,” 510.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of Tan’s influence on Li, see Guisheng Liu, “Tan Li Dazhao Zaoqi Sixiang de Yuanyuan,” *Zhong Gong Dang Shi Tongxun* 20 (October 25, 1989): 3.

⁵⁶ Li, “Shi (Time),” 668.

⁵⁷ E. A. Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 18.

Charles Darwin and Henri Bergson to clarify the consequences for political life of taking seriously what Bennett calls “the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies,” when matter and things have the capacity not only to block human designs but also to be “actants”—forces with trajectories, propensities, and tendencies of their own.⁵⁸ The theories of agency formulated by this “new materialist” literature emphasize, in light of research on entropy, complexity, and cognition, the emergent rather than “given” character of that agency. New materialists emphasize the ways in which the quantity, character, and scope of agency takes shape through its embeddedness in broad, contingent material constellations. And, much like Li’s call to youth to hold firm as rocks in a stream, they recognize that efficacious action requires particular kinds of attitudes: events such as the “modern history” Li evokes inaugurate new configurations of possibilities, but they can “‘happen’ to us only if we are in the right disposition.”⁵⁹

On this reading, agency does not simply equate to a prefigured and transparent causal input to particular social contexts; it is not brought to the political or social arena so much as recognized as one capacity spontaneously and unevenly created within those arenas. In Li’s case, the constituent force that makes possible human agency is time. The ongoing flow of time grounds Li’s understanding of agency as having a material as well as abstract character. “Our life is an eternity within time, an eternity expressed in the present moment, not in the past or the future...the sole thing really within our grasp is now.”⁶⁰ The capacities that enable this action in the present is not a property of the human body, but of a situation in which that body finds itself⁶¹—located as it is in between past and future.

⁵⁸ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2010), viii She appropriates the term “actant” from Bruno Latour.

⁵⁹ Françoise Dastur, “Phenomenology of the Event: Waiting and Surprise,” *Hypatia* 15, no. 4 (2000): 186.

⁶⁰ Li, “Spring,” 16–7.

⁶¹ Sharon R. Krause, “Bodies in Action: Corporeal Agency and Democratic Politics,” *Political Theory* 39, no. 3 (June 2011): 307, doi:10.1177/0090591711400025.

These two comparisons—between the formulations of agency by his historical contemporaries, on one hand, and a series of current debates about the role played by materialist forces in human efficacy, on the other—help to situate Li’s contribution across time as well as space. But to understand the significance of his work solely in terms of these two approaches would fail to heed Li’s own theory about the way action in the present inevitably remakes the past, rather than assumes it; in the process, it would reproduce those problematic frameworks in which global thought remains understood in terms of existing approaches and concerns. To follow Li, we should use the agentic capacities of the present to rework the very historical grounding of future action and thought. Rather than see his work as a derivation of what others have done or are doing, we must also inscribe Li’s particularities as redirections or potentially disruptive formulations of the problem he shares with these two approaches.

We might begin by noting an important contrast between Li and current political theories of agency, namely the former’s lack of attention to freedom as a motivation or goal. This is significant because of the historically tight associations in much western political theory between power, and thus the capacity to act identified with agency, and freedom. Often agency involves (or requires) securing freedom to act, in which rights and responsibilities with respect to other actors are enacted typically by state-centered forms of control.⁶² Even those scholars working on strands of critical theory emerging from Foucault and Habermas, who seek more complex understandings of how power both creates its subjects as well as enables subjects to contest their conditions, define such power in terms of freedom.⁶³ Similar preoccupations mark the more unconventional theorists of new

⁶² e.g., William E Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse*, 3rd ed (Oxford : Blackwell, 1993), 170.

⁶³ Clarissa R. Hayward, *De-Facing Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 7. This revised view defines power as something which enables as well as constrains the freedom to act upon boundaries to personal and social action (177). See also Samuel A. Chambers, “Untimely Politics Avant La Lettre: The Temporality of Social Formations,” *Time & Society* 20, no. 2 (July 1, 2011): 218 fn. 1,

materialism surveyed here. Sharon Krause, for example, embraces new materialist ideas precisely because their more nuanced visions of embodied selves “helps us to see why material inequalities have such a deep impact on freedom,” even as her critique of new materialism is based on a concern that “when agency is conceived as a function of bodies and material assemblages rather than individuated, reflective selves, attributions of personal responsibility become difficult to sustain.”⁶⁴ Diana Coole’s reworked, materialist definition of agency also retains freedom as an “analytical index” of the operation of agency.⁶⁵

The fact that Li’s agency is not preoccupied with freedom (or its corollary, individual responsibility) suggests that it sources a different kind of power—one that is cosmologically informed rather than derived exclusively from human effort.⁶⁶ His anti-imperialist turn after the end of World War I shows that he was not entirely uninterested in modern-day notions of collective democratic action or governmental power. But his calls to action, even after his definitive “conversion” to Marxism in 1920, bank almost exclusively on the formation of particular kinds of subjectivities that merge with ongoing cosmic (or ontological) movements, particularly time. These observations suggest that, for Li, power is best characterized as an influence that emerges from situational leverage; it is not the application of force that attempts to control particular outcomes. We must accept our placement in the flow of time, which exists outside of our total control, even as we must “think” our present as a singular moment in which to act.

Human agency, therefore, is not something that accumulates or is quantifiable. It grows stronger, but not in the sense that some agent accumulates more guarantees of, or

doi:10.1177/0961463X11399174, who argues that the focus of recent accounts of temporality on freedom stem from an unjustified subjective experientialism.

⁶⁴ Krause, “Bodies in Action,” 318, 300.

⁶⁵ Coole, “Rethinking Agency,” 125.

⁶⁶ As has often been noted, Li repurposes Marxist materialism in a way deeply in tune with Confucian and Daoist ideals of cosmological vitalities, evocative of elements found within Daoist texts as well as the metaphysical divination text the *Yijing* (Book of Changes); see Meisner, *Li Ta-Chao*, 110; C. Pozzana, “Spring, Temporality, and History in Li Dazhao,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 3, no. 2 (1995): 289, doi:10.1215/10679847-3-2-283; Renqiu 朱人求 Zhu, “Li Dazhao de Dao Jia Wenhua Qingjie 李大钊的道家文化情结,” *Shehui Kexue Luntan* 9 (2007): 31–36.

wider spaces for, her own free action. Human agents become more powerful only in so far as they grow more capable of felicitously sensing such potentials for leverage, and imbuing others with confidence in that potency. For Li and many of his colleagues before the May Fourth movement, this process is facilitated in both parties not only by felicitous circumstances, but by imbibing more of the “right kind” of education and culture.⁶⁷ By the mid-1920s, Li interpreted this concern in terms of peasant education: class struggle in the villages could be enacted through the help of those with higher levels of culture, such as urban intellectuals. This education, in turn, would release the spontaneous forces of peasantry and make them fully conscious of their role in history.⁶⁸ According to Meisner, this strategy turned on Li’s faith in the abilities of intellectuals “to bring forth the powerful subjective forces latent in the present—the great storehouses of ‘surplus energy’ that Li argued had been accumulating in China over the centuries.”⁶⁹

Despite Meisner’s phrasing here, it seems this kind of power in fact turns more on leverage than on accumulation, on felicitous interventions more than shared consensus. In his central emphasis on the human element, and in retaining a clear boundary between humans and natural forces such as time, Li once again bears closer resemblance to his Chinese contemporaries and predecessors than to new materialists such as Bennett, who urge a further de-anthropomorphization of agency.⁷⁰ As themselves conglomerates or centers of cosmic activity, human subjects retain an important ability to focus these forces in a way that complies with but also exceeds them. He would agree in a limited way with Krause, who

⁶⁷ This dual commitment to both changing external situations and changing human potentialities is captured in a recurrent debate over “good men” versus “good laws,” one iteration of which is examined in Jenco, “Rule by Man and Rule by Law.”

⁶⁸ Meisner, *Li Ta-Chao*, 240, 250.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁷⁰ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 99. Bennett argues that she is not calling for a leveling of differences between humans and non-humans, so much as a closer examination of their affinities (104).

argues that subjectivity—“the capacity to stand in reflexive relation to oneself”—is the very thing that distinguishes *agency* from mere cause.⁷¹

Importantly, however, Li does not embrace Krause’s notion of personal responsibility and subjectivity. To Li, things are only powerful when they are imbricated within human *and* cosmic/temporal relationships, but not in a way that either cumulates in collective action or turns on the interests of distinct, autonomous selves with predetermined political goals. His individualism in this sense is meaningfully Chinese: he does “not stress an individual’s separation, total independence, and uniqueness from external authorities of power,” but rather emphasizes “one’s power from within the context of one’s connection and unity (or harmony) with external authorities of power.”⁷² The independent “ego” for Li is simply the “condition for recognizing the singularity of the times.”⁷³ This particular form of subjectivity finds its extension (to use Li’s term) in the 1980s, as Chinese humanist Marxists revisited the problem of human agency in a world rent by both natural and political forms of power. Emphasizing the voluntarist capacity of the properly ordered human subject to act powerfully on her environment, these humanist positions insist on the subject’s inevitable and dialectical placement within a materialist world she can contribute to but never succeed in totally controlling.⁷⁴ Like current discussions on material agency, however, these Marxist positions suggest the direction of Li’s trajectory only in ways that continue, but do not determine, it.

Li Dazhao and Global Thought

The global aspects of Li’s thought have made his work notoriously difficult to situate in space or time. I have tried to show above that the connections between Li and such a

⁷¹ Krause, “Bodies in Action,” 310.

⁷² Erica Brindley, “Individualism in Classical Chinese Thought,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2011), <http://www.iep.utm.edu/ind-chin/>.

⁷³ Pozzana, “Spring, Temporality, and History in Li Dazhao,” 293.

⁷⁴ e.g., as described in Tongqi Lin and Minghua Li, “Subjectivity: Marxism and ‘The Spiritual’ in China Since Mao,” *Philosophy East and West* 44, no. 4 (October 1, 1994): 609–646, doi:10.2307/1399755.

diverse set of thinkers—ranging from his Chinese contemporaries and predecessors, to Marx and Bergson, and on to a set of current theorists roughly categorized as new materialists—do not signal Li’s incoherence. Rather, I have argued on the basis of Li’s own theory of agency that these connections show how Li formulates a new global thought continuous with not one but a plurality of lineages. In what follows I want to consider the implications—for both Li’s ideas, as well as for the “global thought” I have used his ideas to elaborate—of this new method.

Li’s involvement in founding the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 has led many commentators to interpret his earlier work as building up to the Marxist sympathies he expressed in the 1920s, and his later work as reflecting or developing these pre-existing ideological commitments. In her article “What is Wrong with Li Dazhao?” Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik explains the discomfort that Li caused for Marxist historiography, particularly before the centennial celebration of Li’s birth in 1989.⁷⁵ The problem was that describing Li’s ideas accurately would make him appear earlier in time than he is supposed to: he would be a founder of Chinese communist ideology before the officially designated founding generation, led by Mao Zedong, claimed to take the stage of history.⁷⁶ In a similar way, Li’s influential biographer Maurice Meisner refers repeatedly to the awkward “reappearance” of Li’s “pre-Marxian worldview” long after Li supposedly turned Marxist. It is as though his past worldview, largely comprised of “traditional” ideologies such as Confucianism, forgot it was supposed to stay past. These binaries are reproduced even in more recent Chinese scholarship, where burgeoning attention to Li’s debts to traditional

⁷⁵ Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, “What Is Wrong with Li Dazhao?,” in *New Perspectives on the Chinese Communist Revolution*, ed. Tony Saich and Hans van de Ven (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), 66–7.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

Chinese thought has developed largely independently from research on his later Marxist ideas.⁷⁷

These readings are representative of how thought produced outside of, or in resistance to, globally powerful streams of influence ruptures the temporal expectations which hold their established traditions in place. In sourcing ideas from places and times maligned as backward by Enlightenment narratives of progress, such thought often challenges temporal boundaries between “modern” and “traditional.”⁷⁸ These troubles are deepened further by work which engages ideologies such as social Darwinism and Marxism, at least when those ideologies are defined in terms of commitment to sets of (timeless) principles, or when those principles impose teleological expectations about the development of human thought.⁷⁹ Global thought such as Li’s poses a problem, in other words, because it refuses to fix itself at a particular point in time. Its novel insights are difficult to render in terms of established commitments, because they exhibit no definitive relationship to any particular given past—least of all to those pasts which typically orient Western theorists to what Kimberly Hutchings calls “the cosmopolitical present.”⁸⁰

Recent work in comparative political theory has suggested ways out of these binds, largely through mutual transformation through dialogic interaction. The hope is to interrogate Eurocentric characterizations of modernity which shore up boundaries between “our”

⁷⁷ A recent literature review on Li Dazhao scholarship, for example, reveals the extent to which certain topics are dominated by attention to Li’s Marxism, and others by his traditional influences, with little cross-pollination between the two categories of research. See Mengyun 李梦云 Li and Zhimin 朱志敏 Zhu, “2004 Nian Yi Lai Li Dazhao Yanjiu Shuping 2004 年以来李大钊研究述评,” *Jiaoxue Yu Yanjiu 教学与研究* no. 7 (2011): 23–31.

⁷⁸ Barry Hindess, “The Past Is Another Culture,” *International Political Sociology* 1, no. 4 (2007): 325–338, doi:10.1111/j.1749-5687.2007.00024.x; Postcolonial theorists have drawn particular attention to the ways in which the persistence of “traditional” worldviews may problematize the homogeneity of the “modern”: see, e.g., Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁷⁹ Recent work has exposed the relationship of liberalism’s assumption of progressive time to European imperial projects: see, e.g., Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Kimberly Hutchings, “What Is Orientation in Thinking? On the Question of Time and Timeliness in Cosmopolitical Thought,” *Constellations* 18, no. 2 (June 1, 2011): 190–204, doi:10.1111/j.1467-8675.2011.00633.x.

⁸⁰ Hutchings, “What Is Orientation in Thinking?,” 191.

civilization and “their” tradition.⁸¹ These techniques address the future of global theorizing by suggesting the greater inclusion of historically marginalized voices to our ongoing conversations about political life. They do not, however, directly address the way temporal narratives themselves can be decentered, or past lineages implicated, in the service of this new future. To do so, Hutchings urges the cultivation of a “heterotemporal orientation” to question the fusion of the theorist’s present with “the” present of world politics.⁸² Li’s theory of agency, I contend, enables precisely such an orientation, by drawing attention to the ways in which global thought (such as his own) calls into being—rather than assumes the given existence of—particular yet heterogenous lineages of past thought, sourced from diverse sites of human experience, which go on to inform future modes of thinking and acting. Li’s approach reveals that global thought does not exist in a series of parallel tracks, where thinkers always-already exist within some given genealogy and continue to produce thought in its name. Nor does global thought imply some point of intersection between Chinese and Western thought, such that one instance of comparison is sufficient to capture its novelty. Rather, as Li himself would contend, the creation of global thought is transformative and its processes ongoing. This view has important implications for the role of historically-marginalized bodies of thought in the production of new knowledge.

Typically, as I mentioned above, inclusion of such thought has taken the form of episodic moments of translation or dialogue. In contrast, Li offers a new way by which such thought—in his case, the Confucianism that, by the end of the Qing dynasty, was already subject to contestation and cross-fertilization by other bodies of thought—does more than merely interrupt or chasten some given stream of “modern” (usually read “Western”) thinking and practice. Rather, such thought fundamentally changes where (and when)

⁸¹ Roxanne L. Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism: a Work of Comparative Political Theory* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); Fred Dallmayr, “Beyond Monologue: For a Comparative Political Theory,” *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 2 (2004): 124–144.

⁸² Hutchings, “What Is Orientation in Thinking?,” 201.

thinking in the present and future might ground its arguments, and which historical materials (texts, ideas, events) it may draw upon as a legitimate resource. By drawing on Li to formulate a compelling theory of agency in the present, and by showing how his work in the past expands ongoing research into time in the future, this essay has begun to demonstrate what theorizing of this nature might look like. Connecting Li to the trans-spatial and trans-temporal concerns of thinkers who continue to draw inspiration from Li's own interlocutors, such as Bergson, releases those concerns from prejudicial associations with particular cultural worldviews. At the same time, such connections also register the meaningful continuity of Li's work with contemporary and ongoing discussions of political subjectivity in China.

This is why the two trajectories I have offered here are not usefully described as an internal, particular, Chinese one in contrast to a Western, external, universal (or general) one. Following Li, we might see them as constructing two different pasts for thought whose application is necessarily global rather than local, dynamic rather than static. In that sense, both trajectories self-consciously pose (rather than disingenuously claim to “discover”) a continuity for certain threads within the historically variegated heterogeneity of global thought. These trajectories form both the precedent and the horizon within which particular actors envision their moments of action (their “nows”), but also provide an orientation for how those actions and ideas may apply to other actors and societies in the future. As Claudia Pozzana notes, Li is trying to “locate a theoretical division of time that can allow us to think of time in its singularity as well as in its relation to eternity.”⁸³

These continuities enable the production of knowledge in ways that build from, rather than truncate, indigenous or colonized thought. This is particularly significant at a time when the very globalization of academic knowledge-production has resulted not in a proliferation of knowledge nourished by various local resources, but its standardization along lines of

⁸³ Pozzana, “Spring, Temporality, and History in Li Dazhao,” 289.

European thought and practice. As a result, past traditions once circulating outside of Euro-America have largely been displaced, deepening their marginalization and deflating their capacity to inform present thought or practice. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has observed with respect to the discipline of history, “professional histories produced outside the West... tend to represent a break with past traditions of historiography rather than a point of continuity.”⁸⁴ By cultivating continuity where once there was rupture, Li’s theory of agency and my conceptualization of it as global thought resists rather than reinforces existing patterns of epistemological domination. His intervention reveals each of the trajectories I outlined above as meaningfully fertilizing—that is, providing the terms, criteria, and resources for—a present and future global discussion on materially grounded human agency. Future innovations in this global conversation are disciplined by the very thought whose past they construct, but these lineages necessarily stretch into the past of China as well as Europe. A truly global theory of agency, that is, must be situated in the stream of ideas flowing from many different sources, and recognize its progeny within the knowledge circulating in many different locales. To the extent that global thought as I have described it in this essay does not simply reflect on, but itself embodies, the connectivities which characterize global communities, we might interpret such recognition as particular kind of responsibility: to cultivate attachment to not one but multiple lineages of thought, by asking questions about how and in what ways alternative pasts may chasten our existing modes of enquiry.

These attachments, as Sheldon Pollock has pointed out in his influential examination of the early-modern Sanskrit cosmopolis, are distinct from the mere circulation of things, which “carry no hint of belonging.”⁸⁵ Pollock speaks of the attachments created by literature, but we may extend this to include also the performance of global thought, whose own

⁸⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “A Global and Multicultural ‘Discipline’ of History?,” *History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (February 2, 2006): 109, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2303.2006.00350.x.

⁸⁵ Sheldon Pollock, “Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (October 1, 2000): 594, doi:10.1215/08992363-12-3-591.

creation or consumption of ideas “meant for large worlds or small places is a declaration of affiliation with that world or place.”⁸⁶ Li’s intervention suggests that in this particular case neo-Confucian world-ordering may offer a disciplinary resource to inflect future work in new materialism, in the process “relocating” or “re-centering” its thinking.⁸⁷ The cultivation of such attachments enables not only the provincialization of new materialism, in the sense that its adherents become more reflexive about the exclusions constituted by their own claims to knowledge, but also its globalization: such thought must regard neo-Confucianism as part of the imagined community to which it speaks, and the heritage from which it gains clarity about its own purpose. It therefore becomes important to get these diverse pasts right, even as we recognize with Li the extent to which their present invocation alters their earlier trajectories and thus their meaning, which includes their present and future capacity to influence thought. These implications are given expression in the global influences, as well as the unprecedented and irreducible innovations, of Li Dazhao himself.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Walter D. Mignolo, “The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 66–67; see also Leigh Jenco, “Recentring Political Theory: The Promise of Mobile Locality,” *Cultural Critique* 79 (October 2011): 27–59.