

Morning Assembly

21st September 2015



It is all because of a simple conversation that I had with Kinson Tung of 6C two weeks ago at the back of the stage in between the two assemblies. I asked him how he was getting on with his preparation for his DSE exam. I was delighted to hear that he had been doing all he could to get ready for the challenge and he was reading the works of Liang qichao in order to brush up his Chinese. Since Liang qichao is such an interesting figure in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century China, I promised Kinson that I would talk about him in one of the morning assemblies and that is what I am going to do today.

Lin Yutang (林語堂) once called him "the greatest personality in the history of Chinese journalism" but Liang was also the greatest personality in the Chinese literary world because he was a poet, a novelist and a prolific writer. Moreover, Liang was a scholar, a thinker and a reformist whose political thinking has in fact influenced generations of Chinese people. He used his newspapers and his writings to advocate reforms and change in China. He called himself 飲冰室主人 which is rather difficult for me to translate for our native English speakers here because it literally means the owner of the Ice-drinker's Studio. As to why he called himself this, I will have to leave it to the Chinese and Chinese History teachers to explain the reference to you. It has certainly nothing to do with drinking Coca-Cola or ice water. The title actually describes his sense of desperation and worry about the future of China.

Liang was thrust into the most tumultuous time in the history of China – a time of humiliation when the once glorious and wealthy Chinese Celestial Empire was forced into abject poverty, when the threat of foreign incursions drove the Middle Kingdom, once thought to be invincible, onto the brink of disintegration. First it was the Opium Wars, then it was the burning of the summer palace, the defeat in the Sino-Japanese war, the unfair treatment that China received after the First World War and much, much more. Each slight is a twist of the knife into the psyche of the Chinese intellectuals who once had so much pride in their traditional values and culture. The phrase "Sick Man of the East" was actually coined by Liang to describe the precarious position of China at the turn of the century.

Xi Jinping, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, talked about the Chinese Dream, which he described as "national rejuvenation, improvement of people's livelihoods, prosperity, construction of a better society and a strengthened military". In fact, ever since the outbreak of the First Opium War in 1842, this Chinese Dream was already in the minds of many Chinese intellectual people. This Chinese

Dream was certainly in Liang's mind. Like many of his contemporaries, Liang wanted to figure out the secrets of western superiority.

I have no intention of giving you a lesson on modern Chinese history because I am sure your Chinese History or History teachers will be able to do a much better job than I. It will perhaps suffice to say here that while Liang questioned Confucius thoughts and ancient practices and asked people to make room for a new way of thinking, in his old age he learnt to be more appreciative of his traditional Confucian values and upbringing. His quest for the Chinese dream had interestingly brought him back to the richness of the very classical Chinese heritage that he once rejected.

Today, I would like to share with you a piece of his writing that I came across when I was doing a bit of research on him for this assembly. It is actually a speech entitled 為學與人生 (“On Learning”) which was published in 1922, nearly a hundred years ago. I was attracted by this seemingly simple question that he asked at the beginning of the speech: “Why do we go to school?” Have you ever wondered why you need to go to school? What would your answer be to this question?

- I don't know! Everyone goes to school.
- We go to school because we want to acquire new knowledge.
- We go to school because we need a qualification to get a good job.

For Liang qichao, the ultimate aim of education, however, is not just the acquisition of knowledge or vocational training to meet the needs of the workforce. Education has a much loftier goal. We go to school because we want to learn to be a Man – 為的是學做人.

What is a Man? According to Confucius, the three most important moral attributes that a Man should have are wisdom 知, benevolence 仁 and courage 勇. The three levels of attainment that a Man should achieve are: 知者不惑, 仁者不憂, 勇者不懼 which means that a Man should be wise enough to be discerning and sensible when others are clouded by their emotions, a Man should have the confidence and magnanimity of mind to treat both success and failure as the same, and a Man should have the courage to stand up for what he believes and not be afraid of doing what is right even when other people have doubts.

If you do not know why you have to go to school, it is perhaps time to find out what you want to get from it. If you are not motivated to study the subjects that you are taking, if you are struggling to cope with the demands of exams and you feel frustrated, try your best to tackle your challenges head on and do not give up easily. Just remember that what you are going through now is part of the training for you to be wise and

discerning, for you to have the confidence to face setbacks, for you to have the courage to do what is right, for you to learn to be a Man.

Finally, this is the advice that Liang qichao had for all the young men in 1922 and it is just as relevant to you: 養定你的根本智慧，體驗出你的人格人生觀，保護好你的自由意志。你成人不成人，就看這幾年哩！

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