

## The influence of early western politics on the development of modern China

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**ABSTRACT:** This contribution focuses on both the internal and external factors that led to the emergence and development of communist ideology in China. The People's Republic celebrated the implementation of this political-economic idea in 2021 with the centenary of communism. Nowhere else was this ideology so successful, but the path taken was bloody. Interestingly, some of their leaders also tried to copy other ideas based on Western models, but in fact only led to the disappointment of a misinterpreted freedom, at latest by the negotiations at Versailles. Accordingly, the developments of modern China are brought closer, which on its long way is stronger today even in these times of crisis and is further expanding its influence, among other things, in the course of the New Silk Road.

**KEYWORDS :** *Liang Qichao, Woodrow Wilson, Treaty of Versailles, May Fourth Movement, Silk Road, Communism*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The Chinese Communist Party proves its track record today more than ever as one of the world's largest economies. This article sheds light on the external circumstances that have allowed China to take the path that gives the country its current strength – a historical reflection on the development of the People's Republic, which is increasingly stepping out of the shadow of Western imperialism and increasingly taking over the economic global leadership:

In the long century—a term used among others by the British Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm— which can be dated from 1776/1789 to 1914, the modern social sciences developed, which entered a Eurocentric perspective and, in the short century, the perspective of Western (not least also European) supremacy. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and September 11, 2001, this worldview literally began to falter. The empty phrase about the USA as the only remaining superpower is being shattered by the hopeless wars in the world and is now being firmly denied by the rapid rise of China to become a world power. Asia became the new center of gravity, the rising or already ascended power as the eastern counterpart to the West, which is in the process of decline. The USA's apparent turning away from the Atlantic and towards the Pacific heralded the end of the short century. With the fall of the Wall, Europe became no longer the center of world (history)[1]. In addition, one has to recognize that even these terms and definitions originate from a very Western perception. For the West, the transition was particularly true with the “red menace” on the part of the Soviet Union from 1917 to 1990 and its implosion in 1989, when the West's anti-communist threat fantasies were robbed of their foundations. At the beginning of the 20th century, Asia hardly made an appearance and, in fear of communism, the Japanese island kingdom shared some of the spoils between the wars (e.g. in the course of the "peace conference" in Paris in 1919, when the German-leased territory Tsingtao went into Japanese hands instead of going back to China[2]. However, with this expansion of a territorial power under the protection or rather influence of the Allies from the world wars and the disappointments contrary to the hopes, communism was only indirectly created in Korea, Vietnam, and above all China. In the second half of this short century, Japan was thus assigned to the West.

This is where the complications of a definition begin: The West existed as an alternative world according not only to the geographical conditions, but also to the cultural currents and influences. And the West created the East especially during the 19th century with what is called Orientalism, which corresponded to a Western or Westernized idea of the East. The West, on the other hand, did not exist at that time, because there were only competing imperialist powers trying to divide the world among themselves. From a different perspective –to set

an example – for traditional China, the subcontinent of India existed as the West and not the "seafaring barbarians". That name was chosen for the European maritime powers that forced the Qing Empire to make humiliating concessions since the Opium Wars. It was only under this pressure that China emerged as a nation state in a bloody process of national renewal from which the empire did not survive. In the 19th century, China was not a nation but an empire that had been ruled since 1644 by a foreign elite – the Manchu whose dynastic name had been Qing. It was primarily Chinese exiles who formed the core of republicans, brought down that dynasty in 1911, and subsequently became the inspirers of the May Fourth Movement of 1919, without which the short twentieth century (1914 to 1991, also defined by Hobsbawm) in China would be unthinkable.

To begin with, one can claim that China only emerged from the confrontation with the West and Japan. The Chinese civilization, which also influenced Japan and Korea over the millennia, was the civilization of an empire with a checkered history. The stability of this system rested in a self-sufficient agricultural economy, which Western observers of the 19th century confused with stagnation, while previously in the 18th century Enlighteners – from Leibniz to Voltaire – were still impressed by it. When compared socially with pre-bourgeois Europe, Chinese civilization fared well among the cosmopolitan enlighteners, but this perspective changed radically during the long century. When Earl Macartney tried to persuade the Beijing court in 1792–1794 to open up the Chinese market for new English industrial goods, there was no interest in doing so because the British had little to offer to the emperor. His negative message to the King of England has long been interpreted in the West as a paragon of Sinocentric sentiments of superiority and xenophobic arrogance. However, without a Eurocentric perspective, it shows that China was economically self-sufficient, even if the empire "was stimulated for two centuries by silver from the New World, unlike the trading nation England, it by no means required integration into the international division of labor for its reproduction" [3]. The Opium Wars after 1840 changed not only the terms of trade, but also the view of China and the Orient. For the Western powers, China had become part of a huge landmass behind India, which, in addition to sophisticated products for everyday use, also offered enormous potential for raw materials and exploitable workers. Even Ferdinand von Richthofen, to whom we owe the term "Silk Road", was interested in Asia's resources during his research trips [4]. And Karl Marx contended that "One remembers that China and the tables began to dance when all the rest of the world seemed to stand still – pour encourager les autres" [5]. Marx reversed the common phrase about the Chinese standstill; the calm in Europe after the revolutions of 1848 and 1849 meant a standstill for him. The impatient revolutionary was encouraged by non-European events. Marx and Engels had already observed the geopolitical shift between Orient and Occident in the Communist Manifesto of 1848: "The cheap prices of their goods are the heavy artillery with which they shoot down all the Chinese walls, with which they capitulate the most stubborn xenophobia of the barbarian forces. It compels all nations to adopt the bourgeoisie's mode of production if they do not wish to perish; it compels them to introduce so-called civilization to themselves, i.e., to become bourgeois. In a word, it creates a world in its own image...as it has made the country dependent on the city, it has made the barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilized, the peasant peoples on the bourgeois people, the Orient on the Occident." [6].

In addition to India and the entire Southeast Asian region, the Chinese empire in particular experienced the deepest humiliations – first through the unequal treaties by the Western powers, then through the destruction of the Chinese fleet in the war with Japan from 1894 to 1895 and later through the unspeakable "pacification action" against the Boxer Rebellion launched by combined western troops in 1901, under the supreme command of the Count of Waldersee. The German Emperor Wilhelm II did not invoke Western values to justify ruthless colonial violence, but rather in the name of revenge or preemptive strikes through comparisons with King Etzel (Attila) and his Huns. "Preventive measures" are still an apparently political-military and even moral argument for certain states to invade other countries, as the attack on Iraq in 2003 or now on Ukraine in 2022 show. The German empire was ideologically behind the Western ideology of a "civilizational mission" in the Orient, though Orientalism blossomed all the more intensively in German science. In general, European historians, economists and social theorists (Karl Marx, Max Weber, Werner Sombart, Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee) often gave their continent a much larger role. On the other hand, there were criticisms quite early on, for example by Edward Said in his discussion of the idea of the Orientalism, and actually the term being used for the first time [7].

Max Weber emphasized the religious-sociological perspective, with which religions were compared from the point of view of business ethics [8]. A century after his ideas, towards the end of the short century, Asian and Western ideologists first wanted to explain the success of the Southeast Asian tiger states from Confucianism in order to prepare the Western world for the tiger leap of great China [9]. Liang Qichao's (1873–1929) discussion of Confucianism, on the other hand, can only be understood as an attempt to reform a dominant ideology of the empire into a rational form of rule in a modern nation state, which China did not yet have at the end of the long century. Apart from the first steps towards a republic under Sun Yat-Sen, China only developed into a stable national state after the Second World War and the civil war, when the Communist Party took over the power in 1949. In the more than 70-year history of the People's Republic, interestingly, there have always been arguments about the interpretation of Confucianism and its founder. And yet, more recently, the State Department has

encouraged the establishment of Confucius Institutes around the world. On the one hand, this process points to the legitimating character of a neo-Confucian ideology, but on the other hand to the recognition of the importance of one's own culture and identity, particularly in the course of the Silk Road initiative, instead of a purely economic character.

In the West, too, a new world emerged in the course of the world wars, which has been perceived as the epitome of a new empire since September 11, 2001 at the latest. As early as 1917, when the USA entered the "Great War" (World War I), the US President Woodrow Wilson had proclaimed in his right of self-determination a legitimacy for a violent change in the world, which would not only affect the Empire, but the whole world of ancient dynasties in question. The eastern antipode Lenin not only rejected the right to self-determination, but also questioned the seriousness of the USA, because in the long 19th century the USA had already established itself alongside England as aggressive free trade imperialists: they opened Japan by force for the ships of the West, and practiced as next step an open-door policy towards China, which made China a defenseless object of capitalist ambitions. Wilson's proclamation of the "right to self-determination" in 1918 picked up on the dynamics of national liberation; but the American practice of the Paris peace accords showed everyone – first and foremost the Chinese republicans of the May Fourth movement who felt betrayed – the imperialist interests of this alleged principle.

Thus, right at the beginning of the "American Century", the USA gambled away its moral credit in Asia. Instead, Lenin and the October Revolution were able to establish an anti-imperialist credibility that was only lost over the course of the century. In the eyes of the East, the United States in particular became the epitome of a hostile West, and in the era of decolonization they were perceived as the selfish heirs of the British Empire, which had dominated in the classic age of colonialism – the long century.

### **1. "Democracy" in the United States as seen by Liang Qichao**

The United States made the important transition from pioneer society to European-style industrial society in the late 19th century, and quickly developed a sense of its imperial destiny. In 1902, Woodrow Wilson published his five-volume *History of the American People*, in which he, then President of Princeton University, described the Philippines as a new frontier and frankly acknowledged the growing American hunger for foreign markets – markets "to which diplomacy, if need be, violence must open the way [...] as commerce transcends international frontiers, its nation's flag must follow it, and the closed doors of nations must be forced open"[10]. This is the man who determined the politics of the period after the First World War (14-points plan) [11]. According to this maxim of economic imperialism, the United States had already expelled the Spaniards from the Philippines in order to appear colonialist themselves, and since the 19th century American missionaries, mostly from a Protestant background, have been demonstrating their growing national self-confidence in China, since they were propagating Christianity, at the same time also their "American way of life". But it was business-led interest in particular that peaked, and found expression in the announcement of this open-door policy, designed to protect America's interests in the potentially large Chinese market – certain parallels to today may well be observed. The American media showed corresponding interest when Liang Qichao visited the United States in 1903, noting the extreme inequality: "70% of America's total wealth is in the hands of 20,000 rich people. How strange! How odd!" Referring to the high mortality rate in New York, he quoted the Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu: "Crimson houses smell of wine and meat, while frozen bones lie in the streets. Wealth and poverty within a foot of each other; a suffering too bad to describe." [12]. And political corruption surpassed anything described by Henry Brooks Adams in his novel *Democracy* two decades earlier [13], and Liang's belief in civil rights as a cure for autocracy waned. In Liang's eyes, corporate interests played a fatal role in American politics. Frequent elections encouraged political short-sightedness and cheap populism – this can often be confirmed even in today's times. In the West, too, China's efficiency in the implementation of projects is very readily acknowledged and emphasized, in contrast to the so-called largest democracy, India, where the elected representatives often prefer to postpone controversial projects in the face of upcoming elections. Democracy is best built from the bottom up over a long period of time. It was thought that it could be brought about by revolution and yet the fragility of democracy in France and Latin America could be countered. Even in the United States of America, the liberal democratic state had been enforced with much coercion, and now that America was claiming its place in the world, it was threatened with excessive centralization. Moreover, with growing financial and real power, imperialism would find ever greater approval in America. This was demonstrated not least when the United States secured control of Panama and its canal, reminding Liang of the British who robbed Egypt of its independence by seizing the Suez Canal. Referring to the Monroe Doctrine, he said its original meaning "America belongs to the Americans" has meanwhile changed to "America belongs to the US-Americans". And Liang already added, "Who knows if that will not turn more into 'The world belongs to the United States every day from now on?'" [12]. In fact, the big American corporations threatened to dominate

the world and move across the Pacific. As Huang Zunxian, who served as the Chinese consul-general in San Francisco in the 1880s, wrote,

"The American eagle soars high in the air,  
half the globe in its claws.  
Even if the Chinese came later,  
could you not give them a little space?"[14]

Liang could no longer cling to the notion that only their autocratic system prevented the Chinese from becoming self-confident and national-minded individuals. "Who says America is a nation freely created by all men? I only see a few big men they put on them. Since that is true even for Americans, who are used to being self-governing, others should definitely take that as a warning." The democracy and freedom arising from a revolution in China could only lead to chaos in Liang's eyes instead of molding a nation state that is able to cope with the power of the West. And this was no sudden change of heart on his part, for the rise of Meiji Japan, where he lived after the failed Hundred Days' Reform, had proved that an autocratic state could be more successful in building a modern nation than liberal democratic institutions. When European states increasingly adopted a protectionist economic policy at the expense of (not only) Asia, a change of heart had already begun among many intellectuals in East Asia. An anti-imperialist front that included China's numerous ethnic minorities remained important for Liang. He remained loyal to the mainstream of Chinese nationalism (the anti-Manchu movement declined in importance after the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911). Liang debated with Sun Yat-sen's revolutionaries, and also criticized socialist ideas because, in his opinion, they were not applicable to China's transformation, since in this process a nationalization of capital as land would be necessary.

In its original conception, socialism had its origins in the massive inequality and class struggles provoked by the laissez-faire policies pursued in the West after the Industrial Revolution. China has not seen such polarization and the resulting clashes. What the country needed was industrial production based on capitalist methods, strictly regulated by the state. In this way, China could defy the great power of American economic imperialism and survive in international competition. There were plenty of examples, such as when a megalomaniac businessman like Cecil Rhodes was able to do as he pleased in South Africa because his government supported him. Liang: "The economic policies I advocate are mainly aimed at encouraging and protecting capitalists so that they can do their best in competition with the outside world. This is the policy to which all other considerations should be subordinated"[15]. If this required keeping wages low, then that should be done. Far from advocating Adam Smith's economic liberalism, Liang declared that in the age of imperialism based on the power of state-sponsored corporations, China must accumulate the same resources in order to compete internationally. Everywhere the nation states acted with a unified will and tried to bring the flow of goods and people under their control as much as possible. Which ultimately also happened with globalization...Liang set economic and moral priorities that Mao's heirs may later have remembered: "The encouragement of capital is the most important task, the protection of labor must take second place." [15]. However, his variant of capitalism also contained a strong social component, with regard to which the state should regulate the private sector in order to avoid class tensions, economic exploitation and social conflicts.

## 2. The revolution in the shadow of global conflicts

The revolution that broke out in 1911 and led to the end of the Manchu dynasty was primarily the result of the coincidence of sporadic inner-Chinese upheavals, and, like every revolution, initially gave rise to chaos, because the distance between the emotional ideal of nationalism and the political reality was big. The possibilities of the first free elections brought about the emergence of numerous political parties. But, as is so often the case, it was confirmed that in societies in transition power rests with the soldiers: Yuan Shikai, handed over to the post by Sun Yat-sen, has now become President of the Chinese Republic, quashing all opposition against his party. When the Chinese National Party (Kuomintang) emerged victorious from the first elections, the elected prime minister was allegedly assassinated by Yuan agents, while Sun was forced into exile. In this turmoil, Japan sensed an opportunity and extorted further territorial and economic concessions from the country in 1915, including recognition of Japanese control of Shandong, which had been taken from the Germans the previous year and which Yuan accepted, mainly because of the high level of debt. This contradicted the pan-Asian thinking among many members of the Japanese elite, who actually wanted to support China. In 1916, Yuan Shikai attempted to have himself proclaimed Emperor of China and found a new dynasty, but this was not accepted by outraged opposition, not least within the military. He was forced to withdraw and died that same year. Thus, this more or less stable government led China to the complete disintegration of individual territories ruled by warlords and bandits. This situation lasted partly until 1927 – a situation that is reminiscent of the situation in Afghanistan today. Mao Zedong's home province of Hunan has been hit particularly hard by rival warlords. In 1927 he noted that instead of mastering the Confucian classics, power now came from the barrel of a gun; and the bitter lessons of chaos and despotism should not be forgotten by future generations of Chinese.

Yuan's "failure" made Liang's demands even stronger, and Liang now also negotiated harshly with his former hosts – the Japanese – over their unreasonable demands. He also successfully lobbied for China's entry into the war in 1917, believing that on the victors' side China was most likely to gain access to the international system, to resolve the "unequal treaties" that still bound the country, and to regain the peninsula Shandong from the Japanese. As part of the deals, he negotiated with the Allies, Chinese workers and students, including first-generation communist leaders such as Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping who had traveled to France to work and study. However, Liang's political career was now compromised by his initially politically beneficial associations with corrupt warlords, and he retired from active politics. A younger generation now came to the fore, building on the foundation his ideas had laid. In retrospect, it was recognized that the revolution of 1911 was a failure in several respects, but old ideas were a thing of the past – including the sanctity of the imperial dynasties together with the millennia-old reputation of the civil servants and classical education. By destroying the old, the revolution created a new political and intellectual space in which young Chinese, who had been radicalized by many disappointments, grew to be a new generation. Social and political fragmentation forced even liberal thinkers like Yan Fu to concede that Confucianism, as a state religion, could potentially provide a binding force. But disillusioned with politics, young Chinese spoke of the need for a new culture – a revolution in people's minds that would make it impossible to cling to the traditional. The writer G. Lowes Dickinson, who belonged to the Bloomsbury group, met with some representatives of the revolutionary government in 1912/13 and was surprised at their willingness to go for full westernization:

"They are doing everything to eradicate old China root and branch and create a replica America. I believe there is nothing they would not change if they could, from the streets of Canton to the family system, from the police uniforms to the national religion"[16].

In Hunan Province, a 24-year-old Mao Zedong quickly moved away from his earlier worship of Chinese tradition:

"I used to worry our China might be destroyed, but now I know it is not. Through the creation of a new political system and a change in national character, the German state became the German Reich.[...]The only question is how the changes could be achieved. I believe there must be a total transformation like matter taking on a different form after being destroyed, or like a newborn child coming out of the womb (...) Through the centuries, different nations have produced different great revolutions, periodically have the old cleaned and new things added, and there were always big changes that dealt with life and death, creation and destruction. It is much the same with the end of the universe (...) I look forward to its destruction with great joy, for out of the end of the old universe a new universe will emerge. And won't it be better than the old universe?" [17].

In 1915, the young radicals received a voice that could be heard from afar with the magazine *New Youth*. Outraged by Yuan's attempt at a Confucian coup, they turned their backs on ancient Chinese traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. They dismissed the past as a dead weight dragging China down. Instead, they opted for a full and uncritical adoption of Western values of science and democracy, which together represented the vitality of the West. This formula came from Chen Duxiu, the founder of the *New Youth*, as well as the Chinese Communist Party five years later. In 1916 he wrote in a letter to a friend that he had realized

"...how hopeless it is for us ever to want to catch up with European and American civilizations (...) almost all of our countrymen are lazy and do not know that not only our morality, politics and technology, but even everyday commodities are part of the struggle for existence have not grown and are eliminated in the process of natural selection." [18].

In the eyes of the Chinese radicals, the concept of democracy referred mainly to liberation from the constraints of tradition, and science as a method of realizing progress and overcoming the superstitious aspects of the traditional past, such as the hierarchical relationship prescribed by Confucianism. Nationalism became another important concept, which Chen Duxiu described as follows:

"Looking at the situation in China, our people are still in the age of the scattered grains of sand. We have to adapt to the times, and nationalism is indeed the best means by which the Chinese can save themselves. If you want to apply this teaching, you must first understand what it means (...) Today's nationalism refers to democratic nations and not to nations made up of enslaved people." [19].

Repelled by the machinations of warlords and imperialism, the "new culture movement" would lead China into the modern world, grappling with the questions first formulated by Liang Qichao. The intellectual and social forces liberated by this movement would culminate in the May Fourth Movement in 1919. China's humiliation at the Paris Peace Conference was intended to bring together young intellectuals and clerks and to make the 1911 revolution appear like the work of small, isolated and ineffective elites. Chen Duxiu also wrote as the Confucian traditions were increasingly rejected in this civil war-torn China:

"I would rather see our nation's past culture perish than our race die out because they would be unfit for life in the world" [20].

In 1918, Liang Qichao went to France to attend the Paris Peace Conference, marking the end of World War I as an unofficial representative of China. His list included wages for Chinese labor and raw materials provided to the Allies during the war, an end to the unequal treaties and compensation payments established after the Boxer Rebellion, extraterritorial jurisdiction, and other enforced concessions to foreigners. China now hoped for its place in the international community. After all, US President Woodrow Wilson in particular had made it clear that he wanted to support weaker states and advocate the principle of national self-determination. The United States hoped for emerging from the war as the world's largest financial market, and Asian officials hoped that it would use its influence to restore self-government in countries ruled by European powers. However, the Chinese delegation was excluded from the table of great powers, which included Japan, and was placed on a par with Greece and Siam/Thailand. The Chinese protests were ignored. In the end, the United States, France and Great Britain made all the important decisions. Nonetheless, China hoped that the League of Nations planned by President Wilson could realize its vision of a moral community, and Liang Qichao, who had helped China's entry into the war, had the highest hopes for the peace conference; but for Asian intellectuals and activists it became the toughest lesson in western realpolitik.

At least China belonged to an official delegation, while representatives of other Asian states were completely turned away, including the Vietnamese Ho Chi Minh, who was then called Nguyen Ai Quoc and lived as a penniless laborer in Paris in 1919. After all, the French had recruited a good hundred thousand farmers and craftsmen in Vietnam and transported them to the French battlefields, pointing to their ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity. In return, France promised the country self-government for an unspecified future date. Ho Chi Minh did not trust the French and therefore tried to get a personal meeting with the US President, quoting from the American Declaration of Independence very carefully in his petition. Still, he fell short of any Western leader, and his failure validated an analysis that would become the original text of many anti-colonial activists and thinkers – Lenin's Imperialism as the Highest Stage of Capitalism. In this pamphlet, written in 1916, Lenin asserted that President Wilson would no more ensure the return of Indochina to the Vietnamese than he would withdraw his own troops from Panama. The United States is an imperialist power like Great Britain or Japan, greedy for natural resources, territory and markets, part of a capitalist world system of oppression and plunder whose internal instability led to the First World War. In Asia, the idea was widespread that the European struggle for the spoils of Asia caused the First World War [14]. It is always true with regard to the division of the Middle East, which really became one of the spoils of the imperialist war (with all the crises and conflicts that have continued to this day). Lenin revealed the secret agreement between France, Great Britain and Tsarist Russia on this. Lenin also voluntarily renounced the special rights enjoyed by Russia along with other Western powers and Japan in China, even going so far as to declare that the ethnic nationalities of the old Tsarist Russian Empire should be autonomous and even given the right to secession. This is where the difference between rhetoric and realpolitik becomes apparent again. Lenin was aware that the Asian part in particular represents the majority of humanity and was later confirmed by Stalin:

"Anyone who wants the victory of socialism must not forget the East" [21].

### 3. The Triumph of the Communist Party

Shortly after the October Revolution, Lenin and Stalin called on the peoples of the East to throw off the yoke of imperialist robbers and oppressors. In 1920 the Bolsheviks organized the Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku. A little later, the Comintern helped establish communist parties in various parts of Asia, and Soviet advisers provided educational support for both Chinese nationalists and communists. In 1922, not least as a reaction to the Washington Naval Conference, the Comintern organized the First Congress of Communist and Revolutionary Organizations of the Far East in Moscow [22]. Around 150 delegates, from Korea, Japan, China and Mongolia took part [23]. The Soviet Union's unequivocally anti-imperialist orientation made it attractive to Korean, Persian, Indian, Egyptian and Chinese activists. Sarkar linked the fate of the Asian anti-imperialists with that of the Soviet Union, arriving at extremely astute and precise prophecies when he wrote in 1921:

"China's voice in the political concert of nations will be louder and louder as long as there is a nation on earth that [...] proclaims and practices the liberation of oppressed peoples from foreign rule, regardless of the progress made against it the private property-oriented economic policy of the Bolsheviks among the masses and within the intelligentsia of East Asia." [24].

This new ideology of emancipation was not to gain influence among most Asians until the 1920s. In 1919, Marxism was being studied and debated in many Asian cities and towns, where European merchants and missionaries had set up western-style educational institutions. But the Russian Revolution and its anti-imperialist stance were not well known to educated locals. In most Asian countries, the press supported Wilson and his embassy, as foreign news came from Western news outlets including Reuters. Presumably, President Wilson was trying to refute the Bolshevik thesis that the imperialist powers would divide the spoils among themselves. Lenin tried to influence Western thinkers, who, tired of endless war, seemed receptive to his propaganda. Parallels to today's politics are not accidental.

The poet Qu Qiubai, who studied Buddhism and would later become a key liaison for the nascent Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Moscow, said he felt the "sharp pain of imperialist oppression" that cured him of illusions about impracticable democratic reforms [25]. Among Asians, the Chinese in particular felt betrayed after 1919, since believing they had earned a favorable hearing for their contribution to the Allied effort during World War I. Among other things, hundreds of thousands of Chinese workers during the war had filled in the gaps left by the fallen and wounded European soldiers. In the wake of the Paris Peace Accords, the Chinese delegation argued that Shandong was wholly Chinese and had been taken by German violence, as well as being the birthplace of Confucius and part of Chinese civilization. While Wilson understood the Chinese claim, he could not persuade the British and French to break their wartime promise to the Japanese that Japan would retain the once German colony. Britain and France also wanted to defend their own violent interests in China. By selling munitions to the Allies and expanding its economic influence into Asian markets, Japan had emerged from the war as a major power in the Pacific like the United States had in the Atlantic. However, their demands for racial equality had already been rejected, and Wilson, who wanted Japan in the League of Nations, could not risk alienating the powerful country again.

From Paris, Liang Qichao informed the Chinese leadership of their defeat in relation to Shandong Province. He stressed that the principle of "power equals right" still applies. Weaker nations who take slogans of justice and humanity literally are quickly becoming disillusioned by the strong nations' policy. "China can only count on itself and on its indomitable spirit and courage." [26]. Liang Qichao described that China's only crime was its weakness and belief in international justice after the war. When news of China's failure became known in May 1919, angry students occupied the streets in Beijing, and ensued demonstrations and strikes – the May Fourth Movement at the Gate of Heavenly Peace. The students demanded on banners in English, French and Chinese that their government should reject any treaty that did not recognize Chinese sovereignty over Shandong Province. The delegation at the Paris Peace Conference refused to sign the Versailles Peace Treaty, ignoring the instructions of the political leadership in Beijing, and Japan did not return Shandong until 1923 as a result of massive boycotts and protests. Nevertheless, one must not forget that at that time it was above all the mischief of the warlords that weakened China. Kang Youwei, who was still desperately hoping for a restoration of the Confucian-style monarchy, had to admit that the realization of any real public opinion or real civil rights in China over the last eight years was attributed to the actions of the students, and last but not least to the workers who returned to China radicalized by the rough treatment in Europe. Deng Xiaoping later recalled:

"...suffering life and the humiliations inflicted on us (...) by the henchmen of the capitalists ... When I arrived in France, I learned from working students who had come to France before, two years after the war the country was no longer as urgently dependent on workers as it was in wartime (...), and it was difficult to find a job. Since wages were low, you could not finance your studies with work. Our later experiences showed that one could hardly live off the wages and certainly not go to university and study on them. All our dreams of being able to 'save the country through industrial development', 'acquiring certain skills' or something like that 'to be able to save' were shattered." [27].

As Mao had stated, "the entire Chinese revolutionary movement had its origins in the actions of young students and intellectuals who had awakened." [28]. In July 1919, Russian revolutionaries thus unilaterally renounced their country's unequal treaties with China, in which they sensed only western betrayal and at the same time an opportunity on their part:

"If the Chinese nation wants to become as free as the Russian people and escape the fate that is being assigned to it at Versailles, to transform it into a second Korea or a second India, it should understand that its only allies in the struggle for freedom the Russian workers and peasants and the Red Army of Russia" [14].

Less than two years later, the Chinese Communist Party was founded in Shanghai by a bunch of disaffected young radicals, including Mao Zedong, assigning a clear goal to them and endowing them with ideas free of the burden of the past. All of them had now developed a skepticism about Western motives and policies after the events of 1919 and a broader awareness of the political possibility. Just before Mao formally committed himself to communism, he declared:

"I venture an extraordinary thesis: One day the reform of the Chinese people will reach deeper than that of any other country, and the society of the Chinese people will radiate more than any other people. Gentlemen! Gentlemen! We have to make an effort. We must advance with the utmost strength. Our golden age, our age of glory and greatness is ahead of us" [29].

President Wilson's discredit brought the specter of communism over Asia. Mao, like Ho Chi Minh, came to the conclusion that only communism could bring China or Vietnam to real sovereignty. Mao wrote to friends in France that he had worked through all the other ideas and was only dedicating himself to the Russian revolution. After the failure of 1911, the idea of revolution resurfaced in China, but this time aimed at a more specific opponent – Western imperialism. The idea of revolution took on a decidedly international dimension [14].

#### 4. The way to the future

Asia and Europe – these two "continents" objectively form one landmass. And over the millennia, people, peoples and nations not only tried to cross them, but also to connect them. With the advent of better technological possibilities, this world became smaller. Here is a text from the Soviet interwar period that illustrates well the definition of Europe – Asia and the connectivity in this case via the Trans-Siberian Railway:

"The correspondent of the newspaper [...], a poet, read a shorthand: 'We have more natural wealth than any other country. We need only take the Urals, which represent such a combination of wealth not found in any other country. Ore, coal, oil, grain – everything is in the Urals. We cross the Urals. Scrambling by from left to right, the obelisk 'Europe – Asia' flies by. It is faded, the paint has peeled off. It is completely covered with inscriptions, like a provincial address wall. A pointless obelisk. He stayed behind. So, we are in Asia? Ridiculous. We are moving east at breakneck speed, carrying the revolution with us. We will never be in Asia again. 'To slow down' means to stay behind. And those who remain are beaten. The Mongolian Khans beat us. The Turkish Beks. The Swedish feudal lords. The Polish Lithuanian Pans. The Anglo-French capitalists. The Japanese barons. Everyone hit us because of our backwardness. That is why we must never stay behind again'. The train flew forward. The revolution goes east to come west. No force in the world can stop them. It will go to the west."

This skillful synthesis of press shorthand and poetic prose arose from Valentin Kataev's 1932 novel "In Storm Step Forward!" [30].

The world around Russia or the Soviet Union accelerated its development, and yet both Russia and China have long been at the mercy of the storms of time and Western imperialism. But over time, each Communist Party managed to lift the country out of the shadows of the others. It would take revolution and adaptation, and then greater power and influence, to ultimately dictate to the world the roles and values along the expanding Silk Road. Because the times and challenges have not become any easier in the 21st century: Societies that are confronted with the crises of modernity, which are occurring more and more frequently, can still draw on the wealth of ideas and imagination of these men today. Still, one has to admit that the course of history has simply left behind many of the hopes that were dearest to them. Europe's transition to today's alleged stability, in order to get to its current prosperity, was more than painful. The cautious observer may wonder where Europe and the world at large are going in times of pandemics, refugee crises, the Ukraine conflict, inflation and mounting social unrest, to name just a few 21st century challenges and crises. Hegel and Marx already pointed out that history unfolds in conflicts and reaches an end point [31]. Not only politically, but also energy and economic development was an ongoing process that required adaptation and progress: In the course of the Industrial Revolution, attempts were made to continuously improve energy production. After the first breakthrough was achieved with the help of coal, new fossil raw materials were soon discovered in the form of oil and natural gas. People had to develop new extraction methods such as deep-sea drilling and fracking, and also to find new ways of transporting energy, primarily in the form of electricity. New companies, legal forms and financial institutions were created to organize this energy boom. The speed at which this was done confused contemporaries: "All solid, rusty relationships with their entourage of venerable ideas and views are dissolved, all newly formed ones become outdated before they can ossify. Everything stationary evaporates", Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote in 1848, when the upheavals were still in their infancy. Economics, politics and society were always anchored together, and the process of necessary upheavals and revolutions was often born in pain but was indispensable, but ultimately led the states to success [32].

"Western civilization is based on a philosophical theological tradition of binary opposites", wrote Jiang Shigong in an essay [33]. He noted that for centuries Chinese culture was the envy of the West, until the middle of the 19th century, when China suffered humiliation and misery at the hands of the Western powers during the Opium Wars. The road was difficult and bloody, until the founding of the People's Republic and the victory of the Communist Party. Jiang divided modern history into the eras of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Xi Jinping – corresponding to China's "elevation", "attainment of wealth", and "enlightenment", respectively. Domestically and internationally, Xi Jinping's measures, not least the Silk Road Initiative, are the culmination of the long process that can be traced back to 1921 and the founding of the Chinese Communist Party.

Here revolutionary ideas remain – clear borders, an orderly government, a loyal bureaucracy, a legal code to protect citizens, rapid economic growth through industrial capitalism or socialism, universal schooling, technical knowledge and the development of a sense of common origins within the international community. The transition from criticizing foreign rule and building mass movements to creating a stable basis for self-determination proved to be very difficult. The idealistic impulses behind revolutions and national independence soon faded in many states in the face of the sheer magnitude of national tasks such as sustainable economic growth under territorial consolidation. Catapulted out of long decades of colonial exploitation in a world deeply divided by the Cold War, the new states urgently needed to find aid and capital for their often weak pre-industrial economies, set up a tax system, implement land reforms, create political institutions such as parliaments, electoral commissions and parties, which could make the nation more attractive to ethnic, religious, linguistic and regional groups rather than local allegiances, establish a legal order, make primary education and

health care accessible, fight poverty and crime, and maintain roads and railways. And if that was not enough, they had to arm their countries with a professional army and bureaucracy, rein in population growth, and develop foreign policies that both governed relations with the world. The People's Republic has learned and is learning from history – and from the mistakes that the West often makes today. There is probably no country that was able to fight poverty successfully so quickly [34].

"The great resurgence of the Chinese nation is not just an economic and political revival. It is a revival of political education (...) that will result in the great resurgence of Chinese civilization. ... Chinese civilization is spreading and extending into many more parts of the world." [33].

A more expansive and ambitious vision is hard to imagine, and as such the new Silk Roads are an integral part not only of China's economic and foreign policies, but also of the Chinese worldview – and of the way China is preparing for the future. Here is the document of the State Commission for Development and Reforms. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Department of Commerce March 2015 referenced:

"The concept of joint construction of a belt and a road corresponds to the trend of world multipolarization, economic globalization, cultural diversity and computerization of society, follows the spirit of open regional cooperation, and aims to uphold the global free trade system and the open world economy. The aim of the concept is to promote an orderly and free circulation of economic factors, a highly efficient distribution of resources and a deeper integration, and to encourage the countries concerned to coordinate their economic policies, to develop regional cooperation to achieve more at higher standards and at deeper levels and together an open, tolerant and balanced regional structure that benefits everyone involved." [35]

Even the crises mentioned above such as armed conflicts, epidemics or climate change will not stop it – factors that all play important roles in the past and especially now, and they at least partially give a new direction and shape a new future [36]. Now we will see whether the world will be moving together or will fall apart. In a speech at the 2017 World Economic Summit in Davos, Xi Jinping said that nations should not work against each other, but rather strive to cooperate:

"Our real enemy is not the neighboring country; they are hunger, poverty, ignorance, superstition and prejudice. ... It cannot be right that the richest 1% of the world's population owns more wealth than the remaining 99% (...), while for many families having warm homes, enough to eat and secure jobs remains an unattainable dream." [37]

However, the government is able to fulfill this dream in the wake of successful poverty alleviation in remote areas in all provincial-level regions in mainland China [38].

"We should join hands and grow with the challenge. History is made by the brave. Let's build self-confidence, take action and march arm in arm towards a bright future." (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China" [39].

## 5. Conclusion

The democratic states in the West – once conceived as the lighthouse and intended as a social, political and economic model for other countries – are unfortunately proving their inefficiency and inconsistency in terms of the implementation of values, diplomacy and the economy. On the one hand, the European Union is failing in terms of border security (keyword refugee crisis), and on the other hand, it is imposing sanctions on countries that act more consistently in the face of crisis-related challenges. India and China, on the other hand, are gaining strength with their increasingly consumer-oriented middle classes. States are aware that in a world with limited energy resources increasingly necessary to spur growth, states must draw closer politically and economically. Other ideas and concepts, some of which were historically very old, were taken up again and adapted or revived, as the world is now experiencing with the New Silk Road, with which China intends to lead it into a new future. The Silk Road – it stands for more than an economic corridor. The initiative set by the Communist Party under the leadership of Xi Jinping also helps to bring states and societies together on a political, scientific and cultural level, no longer on the basis of a doctrine on the part of imperialist powers, but as a platform that should be profitable for everyone and despite all crises that may affect the world in a positive progress. The rift in the Atlantic, due to the "alienation" between the Western states on both sides of the ocean, caused mainly by the US isolationist policies of their leaders, should have brought Europe closer to its neighbors to the east, even though, for the moment Western powers, as NATO under leadership of the USA bring all European countries into heavier conflict with Russia, are likely to be stuck into stronger political and economic crises. As a landmass, Europe belongs to Asia anyway, and today it is oriented more towards China. This leads to the transformation of this new world or a revival of what already existed: a peaceful, productive networking of regions across the continents.

And it is here that the PRC, having celebrated its centenary despite the pandemic, is proving its efficiency and success. The Chinese Communist Party and Xi Jinping's Silk Road Initiative serve as facilitators and developers in an increasingly interconnected world, leading the societies and states within that network into a new era

hoping for the glory for which the Silk Road once stood. Here, too, the interweaving of a world that has always been global can be seen in the course of history. Except that in a world that is becoming more and more complex, the East plays an increasingly important role. And yet the part played by Western states and ideologies cannot be underestimated.

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