

# Human Community as Imagination and Practice: Reading Liang Zhan's *Empire's Imagination: Civilization, Ethnicity, and Unfinished Community*

**Xia Fang & Dai Yuncai**

**Abstract:** This essay revisits the intertwined relationship of nation-state to empire in the time of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through Liang Zhan's wide-ranging and penetrative monography, *Empire's Imagination: Civilization, Ethnicity, and Unfinished Community*. Liang's interdisciplinary analysis sketches a panorama of the world. It reveals a vexed situation in which the emergence of the nation-state was simultaneously the betrayal of and the loyalty to the empire. Confined by the intellectual, social-political conditions of the historical moment, rebuilding or strengthening a strong national unity, either imagined or practiced, was doomed to be hard and unfinished. In a transcendental sense, humans, regardless of race, ethnicity, or culture, intrinsically long for an ideal community to maximize the guarantee of security and prosperity. Both historical and present practices illuminate that building a human community benefiting the whole world requires highly intellectual wisdom to avoid being spoiled by colonialist and imperialist ideas.

**Keywords:** nation-state; empire; human community; Kafka; Kang Youwei

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**标题:** 作为想象和实践的人类共同体: 读梁展的《帝国的想象: 文明、族群和未完成的共同体》

**内容摘要:** 本文通过梁展的《帝国的想象——文明、族群与未完成的共同体》审视了 19 世纪末和 20 世纪初民族—国家与帝国之间错综复杂的关系。梁展的跨学科分析勾勒出一幅世界图景, 揭示了民族—国家的出现既是对帝国的背叛也是对帝国的追随这一相互作用的关系。受制于当时历史特有的知识现状和社会政治条件, 无论是在想象中还是在现实中, 重建或强化统一的民族—

国家注定都是艰难的，难以实现的。从超验的角度来看，不论何种种族、民族和文化，人类本质上都渴望生活在一个理想的共同体，以获得最大限度的安全保障与繁荣发展。历史和当下的实践表明，构建一个造福全人类的共同体需要极高的智慧，才能避免重蹈殖民主义和帝国主义的覆辙。

**关键词：**民族－国家；帝国；人类共同体；卡夫卡；康有为

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One expectation from globalization is that human beings, regardless of ethnic or national differences, enjoy a harmonious global community. Unfortunately, instead of embracing a dreamed community, human beings are afflicted by disparity, confrontation, resistance, or even antagonism in the name of civilization, ethnicity, or nation. In response, national studies, empire studies, and postcolonial studies catch a new wave of intellectual attention. Liang Zhan's monograph, *Empire's Imagination: Civilization, Ethnicity, and Unfinished Community*<sup>1</sup> (hereinafter *Empire's Imagination*, or *Empire's* for short), is a fresh contribution to this scholarship. Liang delves into the 20<sup>th</sup>-century emergence of nation-states by placing them in the world historical network. Another noteworthy feature of this book is Liang's interdisciplinary study of literature. His interpretations of literary works are based on but go beyond the texts per se. He combines the method of knowledge archaeology, historical and biographical investigation, and textual analysis. The multidisciplinary study reveals an intricate concomitant relationship between nation-state and empire, in which empire is both a catalyst for nation-state and an obstacle to overcome.<sup>2</sup> Reflecting on humans' enduring interest in building a community, Liang cautions against the deception of liberal imperialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which can be under the guise of "freedom" and "democracy."

*Empire's Imagination* is structured into an introduction and five chapters, thematically arranged as almost autonomous essays that refract the global context of nation-states from different angles based on Kafka's *Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer* (ca. 1917) (*At the Building of the Great Wall of China*<sup>3</sup>) (hereinafter *The*

1 This book is written in Chinese. The translations of the book title, chapter titles, and all Liang Zhan's original arguments in this book are the author's own, unless otherwise noted.

2 See Liang Zhan, *Empire's Imagination: Civilization, Ethnicity, and Unfinished Community*, Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2023, 3.

3 The English translation of the title "Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer" is taken from Clement Greenberg. See Clement Greenberg, "At the Building of the Great Wall of China," *Franz Kafka Today*, edited by Angel Flores and Homer Swander, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1958, 77-81.

*Great Wall* for short), Kang Youwei's *Datong Shu* (ca. 1919)<sup>1</sup>, François Bernier's *Travels in the Mogul Empire* (1891) (hereinafter *Travels* for short), Marx's criticism of the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie in the era of the French Revolution, and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (2006). These five case studies recapture the social conditions of the Austro-Hungary Empire, the Qing Empire, the Mogul Empire, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte's Second Empire, and the liberal imperialism permeating the Southeast Asia region, bringing us a kaleidoscope of nation-states entangling with empires.

### I. Projecting the Empire into the Other Side

The first two chapters, "The Fall and Rebuilding of the Empire: Political Discourse in Kafka's *At the Building of the Great Wall of China*" and "Political Geography and the World of Datong: The Genealogy of Civilization in Kang Yuwei's *Datong Shu*," are elaborated to form an interpretative effect of mutual mirroring, as Kafka's and Kang Youwei's works both articulate how they sought remedies for their empires from the other. These two works representatively map a reciprocal relationship between the East and the West in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Franz Kafka and Kang Youwei were almost contemporaries, as both spent a significant part of their lives in the same period. Kafka was born in Prague, the capital of Bohemia, a kingdom that was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. *The Great Wall of China* is his representative work, believed to have been written in 1917, the dawn of World War I.

Kang Youwei was one of the most influential scholars, thinkers, and reformists in modern China. *Datong Shu* is his most important masterpiece, in which Kang Youwei developed the classical theory of "Datong," originally contained in *The Commentary of Gongyang*, into a utopian vision of the world.

Most critics of Kafka's *The Great Wall of China* interpret Kafka's mentality and the parable of the Great Wall using literary theories<sup>2</sup> or cultural theories<sup>3</sup>. Kang

1 There are many translations as "Great Harmony," "Great Unity," "Great Universality," "Great Similarity," etc. See Albert. H. Y. Chen, "The Concept of 'Datong' in Chinese Philosophy as an Expression of the Idea of the Common Good," *The Common Good: Chinese and American Perspectives*, edited by David Solomon and P. C. Lo, Springer, 2014, 85-102. As the nuanced denotations are not central to this text, "Datong Shu" is taken here as a general term.

2 See John M. Kopper, "Building Walls and Jumping over Them: Constructions in Franz Kafka's 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer'," *MLN* (German Issue) 3 (1983): 351-365.

3 See Zeng Yanbing, "The Great Wall in Transcultural Context: The Great Wall of China," *Franz Kafka and Chinese Culture*, translated by Li Yuan, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 61-79.

Youwei's *Datong Shu* is widely discussed for its sociological and philosophical values.<sup>1</sup> In Liang's view, all literary writings are Foucauldian discourses because all literary practices are inevitably the reflections of history, and at the same time, part of history.<sup>2</sup> Liang took these two texts as a fulcrum on which the internal and external conditions are examined. The way of Liang's reading Kafka is "to reconstruct the historical world from which Kafka emerged at first, and then, against this historical backdrop, to understand how Kafka's lived-in world and the imagined world stimulated each other and interacted with each other" (*Empire's Imagination* 27).

Therefore, Liang elucidates the Great Wall from Kafka's life story, focusing on his exposure to Chinese culture. It is generally agreed that Julius Dittmar's depiction of the Great Wall in his travelogue *Im Neuen China* (1912) inspired Kafka to write about the Great Wall. Liang argues that more importantly, it set the keynote for Kafka's *The Great Wall*: "envisioning China with admiration for Chinese civilization, mixed with pity for its fall, and hope for the ongoing transformation" (*Empire's Imagination* 41-42).

Following Kafka's personal story, Liang reconstructs a broader historical context in which Kafka lived: the Austro-Hungarian Empire in World War I. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was then in an unfavorable situation, and at home, the ethnic conflicts were intensified. Emperor Franz Joseph, the embodiment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867-1918) as a unity, died in 1916. His death put the Empire on the verge of division. Despite this, the imperial notion of "Greater Austria" still dominated the mentalities of the Austro-Hungarian public.<sup>3</sup> Kafka was no exception.

He cast his sight on China for the solution to revitalizing the empire, as social transformation was in full swing in China. Reading the news on China and imagining China, Kafka's mind traversed within and beyond the lived-in empire, shuttling between reality and fantasy. Liang notes that, "These two ancient empires stood on the threshold of revitalization in the 1910-1911 and 1916-1917 respectively, which naturally aroused the boundless political imagination of this writer in Prague" (*Empire's Imagination* 42). Apparently, Kafka's depictions of

1 See Zhang Xiang, *Establishment of Confucianism on Datong: A Study of Kang Youwei's Political and Religious Philosophy*, Beijing: Social Science Academic Press (China), 2023; Albert H. Y. Chen, "The Concept of 'Datong' in Chinese Philosophy as an Expression of the Idea of the Common Good," *The Common Good: Chinese and American Perspectives*, edited by David Solomon and P. C. Lo. Springer, 2014, 85-102.

2 See Liang Zhan, "On the Literalization of Historical Studies and the Historicization of Literary Studies," *Journal of Harbin Institute of Technology (Social Science Edition)* 6 (2021): 102-109.

3 See Liang Zhan, "On What the Empire Was Rebuilt: Kafka's Story of the Great Wall," *China Reading Weekly* 2 March 2016: 13.

building the Great Wall in cooperation and building in sections serve as a political metaphor, respectively, for building a community by undertaking a common task and governing ethnic groups with different languages. Discovering the hidden intention of the piecemeal construction, Kafka gained confidence in his empire. He would like to be a “soldier” fighting for his native empire. However, as Liang notes, “Kafka is just Kafka after all” (*Empire’s Imagination* 83). The reality let him down. He gave up by saying, “I do not wish to go any further in the investigation of these questions at present” (*Empire’s Imagination* 83).

While Kafka was imagining China, Kang Youwei was imagining building a China like Western colonies. Liang approached Kang Youwei’s *Datong Shu* with a focus on his idea of sending Chinese people to Brazil to build a new China there. Adopting the method of knowledge archaeology, Liang diachronically and synchronically reveals the origin of Kang Youwei’s scheme of “Datong” in terms of race from the genesis of “civilization” to the intimate historical case of Brazil’s recruitment of Chinese laborers.

It was not until the European Enlightenment Movement in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that “civilization” was conceptualized and became the equivalent of “progress,” a commendatory notion. With this notion, Europeans categorized themselves as the civilized, separating their culture and themselves from others. Starting from this point, ethnology, ethnography came into being, followed by political geography, governance, demography, anthroponomy, education, nation-state sovereignty, and many other studies. Scaled by this set of knowledge criteria, China was defined as a country that once achieved a highly-ranked civilization, but underwent continuing stagnation and retrogression, and even worse, into a barbaric state.<sup>1</sup>

Synchronically, the discourse of civilization powerfully shaped the Chinese intellectuals in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Then, China suffered the increasing threat of Western intellectual and technological advances. Learning about and from Western colonies became a consensus among the Chinese intellectuals. Kang Youwei was an active learner of Western knowledge. From William and Robert Chambers’s “Information for the People,” Kang Youwei got the theory on race. The awareness of the human race was integrated into the construction of the “Datong” world, in which class boundaries and racial boundaries were abolished.

Kang Youwei’s idea of colonizing Brazil and building a new China in Brazil came up in 1889. Brazil was a new empire built by Pedro I in 1822, who emulated Napoléon I. The new empire attempted to recruit Chinese laborers for its sugar

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1 See Liang Zhan, *Empire’s Imagination: Civilization, Ethnicity, and Unfinished Community*, Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2023, 115-116, 129.

cane and coffee plantations. Fearing that Chinese laborers would be ill-treated, the Chinese government refused Brazil's proposal in 1894. But Kang Youwei thought it was a good opportunity to protect the Chinese race and build a new China, a world of "Datong." Despite Kang Youwei's good intentions, the plan was hardly different from those colonies. He adopted Western colonial methods to colonize others. In this sense, his "Datong" vision is filled with tension and contradictions. Liang argues that *Datong Shu* is merely a tragic chapter of the Chinese nation's intellectual history.

Liang's insightful analysis in the first two chapters highlights the parallels in the intellectual exchange between the East and the West on the theme of empire. Creating *At the Building of the Great Wall of China*, Kafka projected his empire imagination onto China, while Kang Youwei composed *Datong Shu* to build a utopian world of "Datong," which is partly influenced by emerging Western knowledge and colonial practices.

## II. European Writing on the Mogul Empire

Cultural and commercial contacts between the East and the West have existed since ancient times, as demonstrated by Jennifer Speake's edited book *Literature of Travel and Exploration: An Encyclopedia* (2013). European merchants, scholars, missionaries, diplomats, travelers, and adventurers, who travelled to India and lived among Indian societies studying their languages, religions, politics, and cultures, produced scholarly works, travelogues to document and interpret India for European audiences. Europeans perceived India as a land full of gold and spices and a source of fascination and curiosity.

Europeans' interest in India and other Eastern lands was fueled by the fervent European Exploration in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and by the motivation of breaking through the severity of economic, political, and spiritual crises in their own countries. Eurocentric biases and rational inquiry dichotomized the world into the East and the West. The East became the "other" object to be observed and interpreted by the West for and away from the West. The intellectual explorations into Eastern languages, cultures, and institutional organizations effectively facilitated the West's colonial rule and control over the East. The earlier European academic institutions dedicated to Oriental studies include the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO) (National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations), founded in 1795 in Paris, and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), founded in 1916 in London.<sup>1</sup> The most influential contribution to Oriental studies

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<sup>1</sup> For INALCO, see <https://www.inalco.fr/en/inalco-foundation>. For SOAS, see <https://www.london.ac.uk/federation/soas-university-london>. Accessed 27 May 2024.



was made by Edward Said's book *Orientalism*, published in 1978. Said critically defined "Orientalism" as a system of knowledge on the East to justify and maintain Western dominance over the East. Stemming from the Enlightenment's progressivist teleology of history, the East was constructed as an entity with a culture shaped by homogeneous spiritual life. Such construction distorted the Eastern societies as exotic, irrational, and inferior to the counterpart of the West.

Said's thesis of *Orientalism* was reasonable in some sense, but is not tenable and impeccable. Liang considered Orientalism as a Foucauldian discourse, which is confined to the broader historical context and individual conditions. Joining other scholars such as Lucy K. Pick, Gilbert Achar, Liang refuses to take Said's Orientalism as a timeless notion because Said's theory was grounded on the expression of Orientalism in the literature produced exclusively during the post-Enlightenment colonial period. Moreover, Said, as a Palestinian-American literary theorist specializing in the Western understanding and representation of the Middle East, was not sufficiently knowledgeable in philosophy and social sciences. As a consequence, Said's Orientalism, intended to oppose imperialism and colonialism, goes toward its opposite. The dichotomy inevitably results in segregating the East from the West. Hence, in Said's *Orientalism*, the West and the East evolve autonomously, which Achar termed as the "Reversal of Orientalism" (111).

Liang insists that cultural, intellectual, and commercial contacts between the West and the East undoubtedly were meaningful to both sides. The problem with Said's *Orientalism* is that the post-Enlightenment discourse views the Enlightenment as an autonomous intellectual development isolated from the influence of the East. In this case, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century French traveler François Bernier's *Travels in the Mogul Empire* shed light on the intellectual interactions between the East and the West before the Enlightenment movement. Through the lens of *Travels*, Liang addressed the question: What significance did European writings about India play in the West before the Enlightenment?

Convincingly, Liang's selection of Bernier's *Travels* was based on sound reasons. Bernier was not merely a travelogue writer but functioned as a social network node that connected a significant number of prominent French intellectuals. His good birth and early life in France made him popular in the intellectual circles in Paris. He was closely associated with the famous empirical philosopher Pierre Gassendi. Gassendi is known in the history of philosophy for his disputes with Descartes and his influence on John Locke, and his relations with other major figures, including Kepler, Galileo, Mersenne, Beeckman, and Hobbes. Influenced by Gassendi, Bernier developed a desire to travel around the world. From Gassendi's

friend Jean Chappelle, he got a chance to study medicine as a career. The former sent him to India at the turn of 1658 and 1659, and the latter helped him live in India for eight years as a physician. The position in India offered him access to the Moghul court, and he got familiar with Indian nobles and high-ranking officials. In 1669, he returned to France and the French intellectual circle. Chartered by King Louis XIV, he published the four-volume work *Travels* during 1670 and 1671. It was translated into multiple languages and spread across Europe, which established his fame. He was nicknamed “Mogul-Bernier.” His observations on the Mogul Empire became the major sources for the 18<sup>th</sup> century’s racial classification and the ideology of “Oriental Despotism.”<sup>1</sup> This book laid the groundwork for Western knowledge production.

What attracted Liang’s attention was that his writing on India stimulated European thinkers. Liang found that Bernier’s Indian writing was initiated by his French friends. Bernier’s reputation in the French society brought him more chances to make acquaintances with notable figures of his era. His writing about India was originally asked for and financially supported by a group of liberal thinkers to satisfy their thirst for knowledge of the all-around Indian society. This exactly reflects that a climate of intellectuals’ curiosity and desire to understand the world was fostered in Bernier’s time. Liberal thinkers in France were unified to oppose the religious and metaphysical thought authorities, and instead advocated pragmatism, empiricism, and criticism. They were eager to understand the progression of Eastern civilizations, which they believed was helpful for improving Western societies. They hoped to find out the cause and furtherly criticized the widespread practice of men oppressing women in Europe regarding the progress of Eastern civilization. Without any despising presumption, they interpreted Indian customs out of the universal humanitarianism. For example, Bernier and other liberal thinkers harshly condemned “sati” in Hinduism (e.g., the practice of a widow joining the funeral pyre of her recently deceased husband in India) as a barbaric and brutal custom. Their condemnation carried no trace of biases as implied in Said’s *Orientalism*. Interestingly, when “sati” in India was denounced by the liberal thinkers, witch-hunting and witch-burning were justified in Europe. In terms of civilization, India and Europe were at the same level. This was once again confirmed by the similar superstition about solar eclipses held by Europeans and Indians at the same time.

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1 See Siep Stuurman, “François Bernier and the Invention of Racial Classification,” *History Workshop Journal* 50 (2000): 1-21; Pierre H. Boulle, “François Bernier and the Origins of the Modern Concept of Race,” *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*, edited by Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 11-27.



Bernier's comparative views on Europe and India in his *Travels* present a perplexing image of the East, which does not fit into the frame of Said's Orientalism.

Bernier's comparison between France and India was not merely applied to cultures but also to governance, politics, and economic aspects. The subjectivity determines that *Travels* is not a reliable historical account of the Moghul Empire but a representation of Bernier's views on the religions, customs, and politics of the East and the West. Although Montesquieu proposed the famous notion of "Oriental Despotism" by drawing on Bernier's argument regarding land ownership in the Moghul Empire, India and Europe adopted the same landownership system. Based on the close reading of *Travels*, Liang argues that Bernier's Indian writing does not create a backward Eastern image as defined in Said's *Orientalism*, but instead a thought source appealing the Europeans to find a way out for Europe when it was trapped in the overall crisis in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. For this reason, Liang argues that Europeans' Indian writings represented by Bernier's *Travels* before the Enlightenment reflect that the rise of the West in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century was the collusive product of the West and the East. The Eurocentric narratives of the "European Miracle" are problematic. This echoes Andre Gunder Frank's refutation of Eurocentric views on the world, which Frank views as a "unity in diversity." The West and the East interacted in the same global economic entity dominated by the East rather than the West for a significant time in history. The rise of the West and the decline of the East only came up in the years around 1800.<sup>1</sup>

### III. Marx's Criticism of the French Colonial Empire

Regarding "empire," Liang does not agree to the way of uniformly viewing the notion of "empire" or "imperialism" as derogatory in addressing the issue of nation-state. He contends that they vary in connotation in alignment with different historical periods and different national conditions.<sup>2</sup> Liang delved into the case of France for reasons. Among European empires emerging in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the French Colonial Empire was a prominent one. Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it had been the second largest empire, on par with the British Empire. Although the 1789 French Revolution gave birth to the first nation-state in its modern form, French elites' obsession with "empire" was not dampened. Throughout the history of the French Colonial Empire, they incessantly longed to build a great, powerful French country. Therefore, it continued its territorial expansion and set up overseas colonies.

1 See Andre Gunder Frank, *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

2 See Liang Zhan, *Empire's Imagination: Civilization, Ethnicity, and Unfinished Community*, Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2023, 9.

Colonization helped relieve the social crisis caused by the class conflicts at home after the Revolution, thereby manifesting the excellences of French civilization, enhancing its international influence, and strengthening the French national identity. It is noteworthy that nationalism is a double-edged sword. It can promote the cause of justice, but it can also fuel aggressive actions in the name of spreading civilization. The French Colonial Empire was such a case.<sup>1</sup> Liang argues that the French nation-state under the guise of republicanism did not depart from the essence of “empire,” but instead shared with other nation-states in the way that they were all confined to the historical context of prevailing colonialization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup>

Liang addresses the political state of this first nation-state in the human history in the fourth chapter. The 1789 Revolution destroyed the feudal system but did not immediately usher in a brand-new nation-state in which deep-rooted social class conflicts were supposed to give way to a community with shared interests. Liang’s analysis focuses on the life attitude, political attitude, and behaviors of the pretty bourgeois intellectuals who were active in the 1848 French Revolution. The analysis starts from Marx’s criticism of this group of persons. In 1848, a series of armed revolutions, such as the February Revolution of 1848, the German revolutions of 1848-1849, the Vienna October Uprising, etc., broke out in Europe and ended in failure. At that time, Marx was determined to split away from the radical bourgeois democratic republicans and discard their revolutionary method of “conspiracy” to justify revolution with theories and bring it into the open. In all Marx’s works on the 1848-1851 European historical politics, the criticism of petty bourgeois intellectuals who initiated and led the 1848-1851 revolutions in Europe was the constant theme. Living among them for years, Marx was familiar with this cohort in all aspects, including occupation, social status, living conditions, political inclination and representation, and political action.

This cohort of “revolutionaries” grew excessively passionate about vying for control of the state with the conservatives, using “conspiracy.” They went so far away from the original intention of revolution that they “revolted for the sake of revolution” without bothering to consider the actual conditions. They were merely obsessed with conspiracies and riots, living in the phantasmagoria of reality, as emphasized by Benjamin. Liang points out that their political stance was consistent with Baudelaire’s advocacy of “art for the sake of art.” The literary figures depicted

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1 Ma Shengli, “An Analysis of the French Nation-State and the Concept of Nation,” *Chinese Journal of European Studies* 2 (2012): 21-32.

2 See Liang Zhan, *Empire’s Imagination: Civilization, Ethnicity, and Unfinished Community*, Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2023, 15.

by Baudelaire, such as garbage collectors, idle loafers, shared the same nature with those “conspirators.” Furtherly, Liang notes that the phantasmagoria described by Benjamin was not purely spiritual but attributed to the commodity. In the same way, the “specters” in Marx’s eyes were those revolutionaries who imitated the 1789 revolutionary actions for a visionary goal and in the end became idle loafers in politics. The leaders and participants of this revolution were often both petty bourgeois conspirators and Bohemian intellectuals wandering in Paris. Placing the petty bourgeois intellectuals in the process of political interaction and representation struggle during the revolutionary years with reference to Benjamin’s interpretation of Baudelaire, Liang reveals that this cohort presents a generic feature in terms of life attitude, political attitude, and cultural choice. This will help us understand the repeated occurrence of the French Revolution.

History itself is a repository that helps illuminate the present and the future. Grounded on the extensive and intensive analyses of empires in history from the perspective of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century nation-state movement surging from the East to the West, Liang revisits Benedict Anderson’s masterpiece *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983). Before he addresses the hidden danger sprawling in the present liberal imperialism, he revisits his life experience and traces his thought history to reveal the inherent defect in Anderson’s work. Anderson’s anthropological interpretations of Indonesian folk culture and nationalism were largely within the framework of colonialism, which was determined by and reflects his identity as a Western left-wing intellectual. Anderson’s “community” expresses his advocacy of reconciliation between the colonizer and the colonized, and this advocate profoundly maintains the dominance of the West over the East. Thus, Liang proposes that the movement of nation-states, on one hand, be considered as occurring in the global network, and on another, we should not deny the fact that individual nation-states have developed their ways. Liang cautions us against the human community being manipulated to become the tool of liberal imperialism in any case.

*Empire’s Imagination* is a book full of fresh and incisive insights. The author’s ingenious integration of literalization of historical studies and the historicization of literary studies demonstrates his holism in ontology and methodology. He addresses the grand topic of empire and nation-state through the optic of the intersection of individual rich accumulation of knowledge and superb skills of writing, only then can he touch on a vast amount of relevant historical information and integrate it. All these make this book not easy to read, but worthwhile.

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