

Beyond Bureaucracy: Liang Qichao's Translation Leadership and Emperor Guangxu's Unprecedented Backing in the 1898 Reform

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Abstract: During the Hundred Days' Reform, Liang Qichao, a provincial-level graduate (*juven*), was exceptionally appointed by Emperor Guangxu as the head of the Translation Bureau of Imperial University of Peking, making him the only officially designated “translation official” in the Qing court. This paper reveals that his appointment stemmed from Liang's reformist ideas (*General Discussion on Reform*) and practical efforts (Datong Translation Bureau), as well as the recommendation of Xu Zhijing and the support of influential figures such as Yi Kuang. Liang oversaw translation projects in Beijing and Shanghai, drafted regulations, and planned the translation of Western works and the cultivation of talent. Emperor Guangxu demonstrated unprecedented support: not only did he fully adopt Liang's proposals, but he also allocated substantial funding far exceeding the requested amount, despite opposition from conservative factions. This reflects the emperor's strategic view of large-scale translation as one of the “top priorities” of the reform and his heavy reliance on Liang, highlighting the crucial role of translation in late-Qing reforms.

Keywords: Liang Qichao; Emperor Guangxu; Hundred Days' Reform; Translation Bureau; Introduction of Western Learning

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1. Introduction

The Hundred Days' Reform was a patriotic and salvation-driven reform movement initiated by Emperor Guangxu under the advocacy of Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and other reformists in the late Qing Dynasty. The movement included restructuring government institutions, encouraging industrial and mining enterprises, establishing modern schools, translating Western books, abolishing the eight-legged essay in imperial examinations, and training new-style armies. It lasted 103 days, from June 11, 1898, when Emperor Guangxu issued the "Edict on National Reforms," until September 21, 1898, when Empress Dowager Cixi staged a coup. As a significant political reform and intellectual enlightenment movement in modern Chinese history, it played a positive role in advancing ideological, cultural, and social progress. Among its key initiatives was the translation of Western books to cultivate talents well-versed in both Chinese and Western learning. During the reform, Liang Qichao was granted an audience with Emperor Guangxu and awarded the sixth-rank title to oversee the Translation Bureau of Imperial University of Peking. As a leading participant and promoter of the reform and the highest-ranking Qing official in charge of translation affairs, how did Liang Qichao forge an inseparable bond with translation? What was Emperor Guangxu's attitude toward Liang's translation efforts? This paper explores these previously overlooked questions.

2. Liang Qichao's Path to Becoming a Translation Official

Prior to the Hundred Days' Reform, Liang Qichao had attempted the metropolitan civil service examinations three times—in 1890, 1892, and 1895—but failed each time, marking an unsuccessful trajectory in the imperial examination system. However, during this period, he made a life-changing decision: in the autumn of 1890, he became a disciple of Kang Youwei and studied at the Wanmu Caotang Academy. Subsequently, he closely followed Kang's lead in promoting and advocating reformist activities.

In 1895, Liang participated in the "Public Petition of the Examination Candidates" (*Gongche Shangshu*), served as secretary of the Society for the Study of National Strengthening (*Qiang Xuehui*) in Beijing, and became chief editor of its journal, *Universal Gazette* (later renamed *The Chinese Globe Magazine*). In August 1896, he assumed the role of chief editor of *The Chinese Progress* (*Shiwu Bao*) in Shanghai, where he published his seminal work, *General Discussion on Reform* (*Bianfa Tongyi*). In October 1897, he raised funds to establish the Datong Translation Bureau and in November, he became the head instructor of the Shiwu Academy in Changsha. By April 1898, he assisted Kang Youwei in founding the National Protection Society in Beijing, and in May, he joined another "Public Petition" urging imperial examination reform. These activities not only expanded Liang's social influence but also helped him cultivate valuable connections. Nevertheless, before the Hundred Days' Reform began, he remained outside official circles, unrecognized by the imperial court.

On June 11, 1898, Emperor Guangxu issued the "Edict on National Reforms," marking the start of the Hundred Days' Reform. Recommended by Xu Zhijing, a Reader-in-Waiting of Hanlin Academy, the emperor issued an edict on June 13: "The provincial graduate (*juren*) Liang Qichao of Guangdong is to be assessed by

the Office for the Management of Affairs of All Foreign Countries (*Zongli Yamen*) and reported accordingly.”^[1] On July 1, the Zongli Yamen submitted a memorial titled “Memorial on the Provincial Graduate Liang Qichao in Compliance with the Imperial Edict,” stating: “The provincial graduate Liang Qichao of Guangdong is to be prepared for an audience on the 15th day.”^[2] On July 3, Emperor Guangxu summoned Liang Qichao at the Summer Palace and approved the Zongli Yamen’s appended memorial. That same day, an imperial edict was publicly issued: “The provincial graduate Liang Qichao is hereby granted the sixth-rank title and assigned to manage the affairs of the Translation Bureau.”^[3]

Liang Qichao’s imperial audience and subsequent appointment as a sixth-rank official to manage the Translation Bureau were closely tied to the support of two senior court officials. The first was Xu Zhijing, who submitted a memorial recommending Liang to Emperor Guangxu on June 3, 1898, with the following praise:

Liang Qichao, a provincial graduate from Guangdong, possesses outstanding talent and profound wisdom. His learning encompasses both celestial and human affairs, and his knowledge spans China and foreign lands. His works such as *General Discussion on Reform* and various essays in *The Chinese Progress* have gained widespread circulation both domestically and abroad, earning admiration even in Japan, Southeast Asian islands, and Western nations. Chen Baozhen, Governor of Hunan, invited him to serve as chief instructor at the Shiwu Academy, where he established practical and effective school regulations. Should Your Majesty summon him to serve by your side to discuss state affairs and participate in new governance reforms, or appoint him to the Imperial University of Peking to educate scholars, or establish a translation bureau under his direction to translate foreign works, he would undoubtedly perform with remarkable competence and achieve rapid results.^[4]

Despite Xu’s glowing recommendation, Emperor Guangxu did not appoint Liang to an important position near the throne as he had done with Kang Youwei, Zhang Yuanji, Huang Zunxian, and Tan Sitong. As Wang Zhao later explained regarding Liang’s failure to secure a more significant post:

According to Qing court precedent, a summoned *juren* should at minimum receive appointment as a Grand Secretariat Drafter. Given Liang’s considerable reputation at the time, everyone expected he would receive exceptional treatment. However, after the audience, he was only granted the sixth-rank title—essentially maintaining his status as a newspaper editor without obtaining proper official rank. It was said that because Liang was not fluent in Mandarin, communication difficulties during the audience displeased the Emperor, leading to this outcome.^[5]

[1] *Suishou Dengji Dang (Random Register Files)*, 13th day of the fifth month, Guangxu 24 (July 1, 1898), First Historical Archives of China.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Peking University & First Historical Archives of China (eds.). *Selected Archives of the Imperial University of Peking*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2001, p. 42.

[4] Kong Xiangji (ed.). *Blueprint for National Salvation: A Verification of Kang Youwei’s Reform Memorials*. Taipei: United Daily News Cultural Foundation, 1998, p. 100.

[5] Ding Wenjiang & Zhao Fengtian (eds.). *A Chronological Biography of Liang Qichao*. Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 1983, p. 127.



Nevertheless, the Emperor essentially followed the latter two suggestions in Xu's memorial regarding Liang's appointment. Liang not only participated in preparing the Imperial University of Peking (renamed Peking University in 1912), assisting Sun Jia'nai—the Emperor's tutor—in drafting its regulations, but also took charge of managing both the Imperial University Translation Bureau and the Shanghai Official Translation Bureau.

The second key figure who facilitated Liang Qichao's official career in translation was Yi Kuang, Minister of the Zongli Yamen, whose office played a pivotal role in Liang's appointment. This is evident from a memorial submitted by the Zongli Yamen in response to an imperial order.

On June 6, 1898, Censor Li Shengduo submitted a memorial titled "Proposal to Establish a Translation Bureau" to promote Western learning through translation:

If we are to embrace new learning, it would be better to translate more Western books, allowing students to study them in Chinese. This would help preserve our cultural roots while avoiding the shortcomings of previous overseas students who mastered foreign languages but remained ignorant of Chinese. Currently, the translated works available are limited to several dozen publications from the Tongwen Guan and Jiangnan Arsenal, most being outdated texts from twenty years ago. What we regard as novel may already be obsolete in the West. These superficial translations fail to capture the essence and cannot satisfy readers' intellectual thirst. We humbly propose establishing a dedicated translation bureau under imperial decree, selecting several proficient translators, purchasing Western books extensively, categorizing them by subject, identifying the most essential works for translation and publication to broaden intellectual horizons. [1]

Li Shengduo further suggested that either a special minister be appointed to oversee the translation bureau or that the responsibility be assigned to the official in charge of the Government Books Bureau:

If this proposal meets with Your Majesty's approval, the question of whether to appoint a special minister to administer the translation bureau or to have the official in charge of the Government Books Bureau take on this responsibility should be decided by Your Majesty's sagacious judgment, as your humble servant dare not presume to make such recommendations. Submitted with the sincere intention of cultivating talent, I respectfully await Your Majesty's wise consideration and instructions for implementation. [2]

At that time, Sun Jia'nai served as the Minister in charge of the Government Books Bureau. Therefore, Li Shengduo's underlying intention was to have Emperor Guangxu appoint Sun Jia'nai to oversee the translation bureau. As historian Mao Haijian pointed out, "Since the newly proposed translation bureau would be an official institution, Li suggested that Sun Jia'nai, the Minister managing the Government Books Bureau, should

[1] Peking University & the First Historical Archives of China (eds.). *Selected Archives of the Imperial University of Peking*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2001, pp. 14-15.

[2] *Selected Archives of the Imperial University of Peking*, p. 15.

concurrently administer it.”^[1]

Emperor Guangxu referred Li Shengduo’s memorial proposing the translation bureau to the Zongli Yamen for deliberation. According to the “Memorial by Yi Kuang and Others of the Zongli Yamen” submitted on June 28, 1898 as recorded in the Grand Council copies, the Zongli Yamen emphasized the need for prudence in personnel arrangements for managing the translation bureau: “Regarding the original memorial’s suggestion about whether to specially appoint a minister to manage the translation bureau or have the Minister of the Government Books Bureau concurrently handle it—this reflects a prudent approach.”^[2]

Had Li Shengduo’s original proposal been followed strictly, Liang Qichao—then still a commoner without official rank—would have been ineligible for the position. However, the Zongli Yamen argued that success in translation and educational endeavors depended on managerial competence rather than official rank: “The matter of translation and the establishment of schools are fundamentally interrelated; success depends entirely on finding the right managers, not on the level of their official positions.”^[3] This effectively rejected Li Shengduo’s suggestion, as the Zongli Yamen considered Liang Qichao the ideal candidate to oversee translation affairs:

We have ascertained that Liang Qichao, a provincial graduate from Guangdong, has devoted himself to Western learning and established a translation bureau in Shanghai through fundraising. Having already initiated Japanese-language translations with an established framework, the bureau currently lacks sufficient funding for sustainable operations. As Shanghai serves as the primary hub for Sino-foreign interactions, it offers exceptional access to foreign books and more economical printing costs. Entrusting this graduate with translation management would yield multiplied efficiency.^[4]

Yi Kuang and his colleagues further proposed converting Liang’s privately established Datong Translation Bureau in Shanghai into an official institution with state funding:

After joint deliberation, we propose monthly funding of 2,000 taels of silver to support the translation bureau’s translation work, thereby converting it into an official translation bureau operating under government supervision with merchant participation. Should additional funds be required, the bureau may raise supplementary capital through share offerings to ensure completion of its mission.^[5]

On July 2, 1898, the Zongli Yamen submitted another memorial titled “Supplementary Memorial Recommending Provincial Graduate Liang Qichao to Concurrently Manage the Translation Bureau,” proposing that Liang oversee both the Imperial University Translation Bureau in Beijing and the Official Translation Bureau in Shanghai. They further recommended Liang take charge of compiling and translating textbooks for the new

[1] Mao Haijian. “The Initial Establishment of the Imperial University of Peking: On the Conflict Between the Kang Youwei Faction and the Sun Jia’nai Faction,” in *Peking University Historical Studies*, Vol. 13. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2008, p. 257.

[2] Anonymous. “Archival Materials on the 1898 Reforms,” in Shen Yunlong (ed.), *Continued Compilation of Historical Materials on Modern China*, Vol. 32. Taipei: Wenhai Press, 1974, p. 449.

[3] *Archival Materials on the 1898 Reforms*, p. 449.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

schools, with a monthly stipend of 1,000 taels of silver:

The Western works requiring translation are numerous, and translating each book presents considerable difficulty. If the two bureaus translate separately without coordination, redundant translations may occur, wasting resources unnecessarily. Moreover, unified terminology across translations is essential for readers' convenience. Therefore, it would be most appropriate to have the Imperial University's Translation Bureau and Shanghai's Official Translation Bureau managed under unified direction. Shanghai, as a crucial Sino-foreign hub, offers distinct advantages in procuring foreign books and hiring translators. Having previously memorialized about Liang Qichao's qualifications for this task and received approval, we now propose integrating the translation bureau of Imperial University of Peking with its Shanghai counterpart under his management. The graduate should travel between Beijing and Shanghai as needed to supervise operations, drafting detailed regulations for our office's review and implementation.

As the Translation Bureau in Beijing primarily serves educational purposes, its focus should be translating Western textbooks while distilling essential Chinese classics into curricular materials for nationwide distribution—a task of paramount importance requiring exceptional editorial talent. Liang Qichao, with his profound scholarship, demonstrated outstanding pedagogical achievements at Hunan's Shiwu Academy through his compiled course materials. Entrusting him with this mission and allowing him to appoint sub-editors would ensure successful execution. Compared to Shanghai's bureau, the capital bureau requires less funding; we therefore propose a monthly allocation of 1,000 taels from the Ministry of Revenue's annual budget for the Imperial University, which would be both adequate and convenient.^[1]

The memorial's characterization of Liang—using phrases like “fully qualified,” “grounded in fundamental scholarship,” “demonstrated remarkable effectiveness,” and “capable of completing the task with satisfaction”—clearly reflects Yi Kuang and his colleagues' high esteem for Liang's academic capabilities. Emperor Guangxu approved the Zongli Yamen's proposal that very day.

Consequently, Liang Qichao assumed dual management of both the Imperial University's Translation Bureau in Beijing and the Official Translation Bureau in Shanghai. His responsibilities included drafting regulations for both institutions, recruiting translation and editorial staff, and overseeing the procurement of equipment and reference materials—a comprehensive mandate that positioned him at the heart of China's institutional translation efforts during the reform period.

3. Emperor Guangxu's Attitude Toward Liang Qichao's Translation Leadership

Liang Qichao's 1896 essay series *General Discussion on Reform* catapulted him to fame, making his name known “from major cities down to remote villages—none had not heard of Liang from Xinhui.”^[2] The

[1] *Selected Archives of the Imperial University of Peking*. Beijing: Peking University Press, pp. 40-41. Note: The memorial refers to the Imperial University's translation bureau as the “Compilation Bureau” or “Capital Bureau.”

[2] Hu Simin. *Records of the 1898 Reforms*, Vol. 4.

sensational impact of *General Discussion on Reform* naturally drew Emperor Guangxu's attention, as evidenced by his request to review the text during Liang's audience. In *A Chronicle of the 1898 Coup*, Liang recounted the emperor's summons and appointment:

China's weakness stems from its people's ignorance. Their ignorance, in turn, arises from failing to read the books of all nations or understand global affairs. To remedy this, two measures are essential: first, establishing schools to teach Western languages; second, translating Western works into Chinese. Neither can be neglected.

However, schools can only educate the young. Adults, already advanced in years, often find it difficult to pursue study. Moreover, children's intellectual faculties remain underdeveloped, their comprehension limited—thus, their grasp of complex ideas and capacity for learning generally falls short of mature minds. And since those shaping contemporary national discourse are adults, not children, meaningful reform requires the nation's vigorous, ambitious men to read Western books and master Western learning. Hence, translation stands as reform's most urgent priority.

China's existing translations focus overwhelmingly on medicine and military science, with scant representation of political science, public finance, or law—fields nearly absent from our corpus. Worse, these translations, mostly decades old, contain long-discarded Western ideas, rendering them useless for enlightening minds or shifting scholarly debate. ...

At this juncture, Censor Yang Shenxiu memorialized on the critical importance of translation. On the same day, I received his summons. The emperor commanded me to present *General Discussion on Reform*, praised it highly, and thus issued his appointment. ^[1]

Mao Haijian observes that “for a provincial graduate, being personally summoned by Emperor Guangxu, appointed to an official position through imperial decree, and publicly announced was an extraordinary occurrence at the time.” ^[2] From Xu Zhijing's recommendation of Liang Qichao to the proposals put forward by Yi Kuang and others at the Zongli Yamen, Emperor Guangxu adopted nearly all suggestions regarding Liang's appointment. In fact, Liang Qichao and Sun Jia'nai were the first officials appointed by the emperor during the Hundred Days' Reform to prepare for the establishment of the Imperial University of Peking. Moreover, Liang was the only official throughout the entire reform period personally appointed by the emperor to oversee translation bureau affairs.

On August 16, Sun Jia'nai submitted Liang Qichao's “Memorial Proposing Regulations for the Imperial University Translation Bureau and Detailing Preparatory Measures” on his behalf. That same day, Emperor Guangxu approved it and issued a public edict:

Sun Jia'nai has submitted a memorial on behalf of the provincial graduate Liang Qichao, proposing ten

[1] Liang Qichao. “A Chronicle of the 1898 Coup,” in Lin Zhijun (ed.). *Collected Works from the Ice-Drinker's Studio: Special Collections*, Vol. 1. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1936, pp. 27–28.

[2] Mao Haijian. *The Establishment of the Imperial University of Peking*, p. 271.

articles for the Translation Bureau's regulations and detailing preparatory measures. As the bureau's operations were previously assigned to Liang Qichao, and given that the establishment of the Imperial University in the capital concerns international perceptions, the urgent compilation and translation of textbooks are essential for student instruction. The regulations proposed by this provincial graduate are all practical and shall be implemented as presented.

Since this endeavor is in its initial stages, long-term planning must take priority. Ample funding is required to prevent haphazard execution or compromised standards. The current expenses for purchasing machinery and Chinese/foreign books are substantial. While the requested initial funding of 10,000 taels of silver was approved, this may prove insufficient for expansion. An additional 10,000 taels is hereby granted to ensure unimpeded progress. Similarly, annual operational costs should be calculated generously: beyond the originally allocated monthly sum of 1,000 taels, an extra 2,000 taels will be provided to facilitate the recruitment of qualified personnel and support the advancement of this endeavor.

The Ministry of Revenue shall immediately allocate all aforementioned funds. Beginning on the first day of the seventh month, monthly disbursements must be issued in advance without delay. The Imperial University and the Chinese Progress Press must commence operations promptly. Should additional funding be required, Sun Jia'nai is authorized to submit further memorials. Regarding the university's borrowed premises, the Imperial Household Department has repeatedly been ordered to complete renovations and transfer the space without delay.^[1]

Emperor Guangxu held Liang Qichao in high esteem and granted him unprecedented privileges. While Liang had originally requested 10,000 taels of silver as initial funding, the emperor doubled this amount with an additional 10,000 taels and increased the monthly operational budget from 1,000 to 3,000 taels—an exceptionally generous allocation rarely seen during Guangxu's reign.^[2] As early as August 10, 1898, the Zongli Yamen had submitted the “Memorial Requesting Translation Bureau Funding and Official Seal”:

In our deliberative response to the memorials by Censors Yang Shenxiu and Li Shengduo proposing the establishment of a translation bureau, we recommended appointing provincial graduate Liang Qichao to manage the Shanghai Official Translation Bureau, with a monthly allocation of 2,000 taels from diplomatic funds. ... Operations commenced on the first day of the sixth month. However, essential startup costs—including book purchases, machinery acquisition, and building construction—require approximately 40,000 taels to properly launch. ... The requested 40,000 taels in initial funding should therefore be approved to ensure timely establishment.^[3]

Emperor Guangxu immediately endorsed this with a vermilion rescript: “Approved as proposed.” Regarding financial support, Mao Haijian notes that Liang became the best-funded Qing official at the time—the Shanghai

[1] *Selected Archives of the Imperial University of Peking*, p. 53.

[2] Mao Haijian. *The Establishment of the Imperial University of Peking*, p. 290.

[3] *Selected Historical Materials on the Imperial University of Peking*, p. 51.

bureau received 40,000 taels in startup funds plus 2,000 taels monthly, while the capital bureau had 20,000 taels and 3,000 taels respectively. Combined, Liang controlled 60,000 taels in initial capital and 5,000 taels monthly. ^[1]

On August 26, Sun Jia'nai submitted two additional proposals on Liang's behalf: the "Memorial Proposing a Translation Academy in Shanghai with Official Degrees for Graduates" and the "Petition to Waive Customs Duties on Books and Newspapers." The emperor approved both immediately:

Sun Jia'nai has memorialized provincial graduate Liang Qichao's proposals to establish a translation academy with degree qualifications for students, and to exempt books/newspapers from customs duties. As the graduate oversees translation bureau operations, this Shanghai academy aims to cultivate translation talent. Qualified graduates upon examination may receive official degrees. The requested duty exemptions for all books and newspapers are hereby approved. ^[2]

Throughout the Hundred Days' Reform, Kang Youwei's reformist faction faced relentless attacks from conservative forces. As Kang's chief lieutenant, Liang Qichao became a prime target. Conservative hardliners like Ye Dehui viciously assailed Liang's teaching materials and annotations from his tenure as head instructor at Hunan's Shiwu Academy—particularly those criticizing autocratic rule and advocating civil rights revolution. They went so far as to petition for Liang's execution. Yet Emperor Guangxu remained unmoved. Every memorial drafted by Liang received prompt imperial approval, demonstrating the emperor's steadfast support despite mounting conservative pressure.

4. Conclusion

The rise of Liang Qichao as the "sixth-rank Translation Official" and his leadership in translation bureaus during the Hundred Days' Reform transcended personal achievement or institutional establishment. It underscored translation's unprecedented elevation to a national strategic priority, serving as the core engine of Emperor Guangxu's reform agenda. This historical episode revealed a rare consensus and collaborative effort among reformists, progressive officials, and the emperor himself, all centered on the pivotal mission of knowledge transformation.

Emperor Guangxu's extraordinary trust and support for Liang Qichao were unparalleled in late-Qing politics. He not only fully endorsed Liang's translation plans but also demonstrated remarkable resolve in resource allocation: doubling the requested startup funds and significantly increasing monthly budgets, granting Liang financial resources far exceeding those of contemporaneous officials. Despite fierce attacks from conservative factions—including petitions demanding Liang's execution for his radical teachings at the Shiwu Academy—the emperor stood firm, promptly approving every one of Liang's memorials. Such exceptional backing was no mere

[1] Mao Haijian. *The Establishment of the Imperial University of Peking*, p. 290.

[2] First Historical Archives of China (ed.). *Guangxu Reign Edict Archives*, Vol. 24. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 1996, pp. 320-321.



patronage but reflected a clear strategic vision: large-scale, systematic translation of Western works on governance, law, and economics constituted the foremost urgent task to enlighten officials, cultivate talent, and furnish intellectual foundations for reform. This marked the first time the imperial court positioned translation as the central lever for societal and ideological change.

Liang Qichao emerged as both the ideal executor and embodiment of this vision. His coordination of translation efforts in Beijing and Shanghai aimed to construct a nationwide knowledge-production system: avoiding redundancy through unified planning, prioritizing “textbooks for modern schools,” and establishing translation academies to train local talent. At its core, his work elevated translation from scattered technical activities to a state-led, systematic knowledge engineering project, directly targeting the renewal of scholarly intellect and the forging of reform consensus.

Though short-lived due to the reform’s abrupt collapse, the Translation Bureau’s legacy endured. It represented the Qing court’s first institutionalized attempt to integrate large-scale translation into the heart of national reform. This model of translation-driven transformation, with its emphasis on knowledge renewal and talent cultivation, left an indelible mark on subsequent intellectual enlightenment and modernization efforts. It testified to the catalytic role of knowledge in national salvation and revival—a lesson resonating far beyond its immediate historical moment.

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