

Modernity under the Alias 'Oriental Bismarck' of Li Hongzhang: The Lack of Cultural Subjectivity and the Reconstruction of Nationalism

Yulun Liu^{1,a,*}

¹*Department of History, Faculty of Arts&Humanities, King's College London, London, UK*

a. liuyulun9835@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: As a prominent politician of the late Qing dynasty, Li Hongzhang possessed numerous aliases, among which "Oriental Bismarck" holds a special significance. This appellation not only reflects the shift in the Chinese evaluation system of historical figures from traditional modes under the influence of Orientalism but also implies the consciousness and practice of nationalism in the modernization model of developing countries. Against the backdrop of the wave of colonialism and the statism vision of self-improvement, concepts like "Oriental-someone/something" in Chinese context embody a loss of cultural subjectivity of the traditional Chinese discourse power. Simultaneously, it reveals that, amidst the entanglement between the old China and the West, certain foreign elements and cultural symbols could be useful to construct the modernity and to affirm the uniqueness of China itself, by relying on nationalism. By analyzing the cultural significance and historical ruptures behind appellations like "Oriental Bismarck," this article adopts a postmodern historical perspective to criticize simplistic interpretations of modernization theory and explores how these appellations serve as important windows for studying the construction of history and modernity.

Keywords: Oriental Bismarck, Chinese Bismarck, Modernity, Orientalism, Nationalism

1. Introduction

The aliases addressed to historical figures often form the basis for people's evaluation of them. In a historical context, the creation, evolution, and inheritance of these aliases are reflected in language as a Derridean process of "difference."

Li Hongzhang, a pivotal figure in the modernization process of China, had many aliases during his lifetime and afterwards. Using aliases to address individuals is a common narrative practice throughout history, both domestically and internationally. In ancient China, for instance, "Posthumous titles" or so called "Shi Hao" would be the ultimate summary and evaluation of the deeds of individuals after their death from the official discourse. After Li's death, he was posthumously titled "Wenzhong" by the Qing Dynasty. When later generations compiled his collected works, they named it "The Complete Works of Li Wenzhong." In addition, due to his official positions, Li Hongzhang was also referred to as "Li Boxiang" and "Li Zhongtang" (Xiang and Zhongtang mean the Premier). According to his contributions during the short revival in

Tongzhi emperors period, people grouped him with Zeng Guofan, Zhang Zhidong, and Zuo Zongtang, collectively known as the "Four Great Ministers." However, because of his failure and mistakes in various events, such as the First Sino-Japanese War and the Sino-French War, some criticized or even slandered him as a "traitor of nation".

Among the many aliases of Li Hongzhang, the most distinctive one is the title "Oriental Bismarck." Unlike the titles "Li Wenzhong" and "Li Zhongtang," "Oriental Bismarck" carries connotations of foreign elements. In the spring of 1896, during Li Hongzhang's visit to Europe and America as a "Special Envoy of the Emperor," the moniker "Oriental Bismarck" spread throughout Europe and America, especially after his meeting with Bismarck in Hamburg, Germany, on June 24th, which created the anecdote of the "Oriental Bismarck" meeting the "Western Bismarck".

Over the past century, there has been an abundance of literature on Li Hongzhang, but the circulated appellation of "Oriental Bismarck" lacks sufficient scrutiny and exploration. How did this appellation originate and evolve? Why did Bismarck become a standard reference for evaluating Li Hongzhang, especially considering that they barely had little connection while both of them were famous figures in a common historical space and time? Appellations always endure and shape memory and history. Therefore, the history of appellations is actually a microcosm of intellectual history and contemporary history, offering a new perspective for historical research.

2. Under the spread of "Oriental XXX": the lack of cultural subjectivity and the historical narratives modern change

Since the late Qing Dynasty, with the intrusion of Western civilization and the decline of China, the so-called "Oriental XXX" appellations have become popular in various aspects of Chinese society. For example, Shanghai was called the "Oriental Paris," Wuhan was referred to as the "Oriental Chicago," Tang Xianzu was dubbed the "Oriental Shakespeare," and of course, there's Li Hongzhang's "Oriental Bismarck." From the perspective of modernist historical narrative, these appellations not only reflect the influence of Western centrism but also reveal the gradual loss of subjectivity in Eastern culture throughout this process.

For over a century, many have mentioned the title "Oriental Bismarck" attributed to Li Hongzhang. However, scholars and the public often focus more on whether Li Hongzhang "deserves" the title of Bismarck, rather than questioning why Bismarck is used as a comparison. This lack of attention precisely reflects the marginal position of the East in the global discourse power structure, the loss of cultural subjectivity, and the phenomenon of passively adopting Western templates.

Edward Said proposed the concept of "Orientalism" in the 1970s, criticizing the long-standing Eurocentrism and colonialism entrenched in Western modernity[1]. In Said's critical theory, Western centrism, represented by the Western academic community, regards Western society, civilization, culture, and institutions as a template, while the East becomes the mystified, minor, and imagined "other" in this context. Said's era coincided with the rise of left-wing critical theory and postmodern criticism in Europe and America. Similarly, Michel Foucault, a contemporary of Said, proposed in his interpretations of "archaeology of knowledge" and "discourse of power" how power relations in historical discourse lead to the replacement of old structures with new ones, resulting in fractured rather than continuous narratives of history[2]. This explains how Orientalism, hidden beneath modernity, replaces traditional narratives of history and culture in colonized cultural areas such as China. Specifically, the emergence and popularity of titles like "Oriental Someone" in China deeply reflect the collapse of the ancient Chinese view of the Celestial Empire and the reverence for modernity centered on Western civilization.

However, left-wing critical theory seems to only explain the reasons for the emergence of "Oriental someone" in modern China, yet it is still insufficient to answer why concepts like

"Bismarck" are chosen when embedded in non-Western cultural expressions. The process of embedding these terms into Eastern culture often stems from the specific historical contexts of particular countries and is influenced by the world history of the era in which they appear. A case in point illustrates this: amid the "unprecedented changes in three thousand years" that Li Hongzhang faced, another Eastern country—Japan, also gave birth to its own "Oriental Bismarck." Okubo Toshimichi, as one of the most important historical figures in Japan's Meiji Restoration and government, was not only likened to Bismarck by the Japanese for his iron-fisted methods in suppressing domestic rebellions and promoting reforms but himself also idolized Bismarck[3].

The emergence and adoption of appellations like "Oriental Bismarck" as a framework for evaluating political figures indicate a fact: that Otto von Bismarck, the iron-blooded chancellor who shaped the German Empire, was alienated into a symbol and an object of worship at the political, national, and global levels. In the modernist narrative, Germany provided a model for backward countries to become powerful nations through military efforts. On the other hand, Eastern countries such as China and Japan accepted the Western-dominated modern state model and world order, ending their traditional, outdated Eastern-centric viewpoints.

This explains why scholars are more concerned with whether Li Hongzhang "deserves" the title of Bismarck, rather than questioning why Bismarck is used as a benchmark for evaluating Li Hongzhang, as modernist narrative replaces traditional historiography. In traditional historiography, Li Hongzhang was regarded as a capable minister who stabilized the country and mitigated crises due to his contributions such as organizing the Huai Army to suppress the Taiping Rebellion and the Nian Rebellion and establishing the Beiyang Fleet to compete with foreign powers for benefits. However, a negative image of Li Hongzhang gradually emerged in the rising tide of new historical studies since the Republic of China era. Liang Qichao's *Biography of Li Hongzhang* believed that although Li made contributions to the Qing Dynasty, his mistakes in harming the country and the people could not be ignored. Liang Qichao considered Li as a "hero created by the times, not a hero who created the times." [4] After the founding of the People's Republic of China, a materialistic and class-based historical perspective became the mainstream for studying and evaluating historical figures. Li Hongzhang was thus branded with the stigma of "traitor to the nation" in official academic circles. *The Treacherous History of Li Hongzhang* stands as the most typical representation of this [5]. After the reform and opening-up, although some more extreme views of class-based historical perspective have been corrected, the evaluation of Li Hongzhang still revolves around whether he made contributions to China's modernization [6].

In the vast ocean of historical research and writings on Li Hongzhang, studies generally follow a modernist perspective, where "modernity" becomes the supreme, transcendent, and self-evident backdrop. Although studies from different perspectives may draw different images of Li Hongzhang, "Oriental Bismarck" remains the shadow that Li Hongzhang always strives to become or cannot become.

3. An exploration of the origin of "Oriental Bismarck"

Over the past century of studying Li Hongzhang, as a key figure in late Qing Dynasty diplomacy, his identity sandwiched between the Qing Dynasty and the Western powers has had many subtle influences on his image construction. The term "Oriental Bismarck," representing this delicate relationship, emerged as a result. Despite the rich literature on Li Hongzhang, there has been scant scholarly investigation into the widely circulated appellation of "Oriental Bismarck," and even among the general public, there exist many erroneous or misrepresented stories.

Historical records show that the appellation of "Oriental Bismarck" was already popular during Li's lifetime, and by no later than 1896, after Li's visits to European and American countries, it was well-known both domestically and internationally. For instance, during Li's meeting with Bismarck

in Hamburg, Germany, on June 24th, 1896, an entourage member complimented, "This is truly a historic meeting between the Oriental Bismarck and the Western Bismarck!"[7] German engineer Lobbekt Robert who came to China in the 1880s as an engineer hired by Viceroy Zhang Zhidong of Liangjiang Provinces and later became an instructor at the Nanjing Army Academy, also referred to Li Hongzhang as "Bismarck" in his letters to his mother in Germany[8]. After the Boxer Rebellion, some foreign sources also mentioned appellations such as "Oriental Bismarck" or "Bismarck of China." For example, *The Eyewitness Account of the Eight-Nation Alliance* and the Italian newspaper *Il Domenica del Corriere* mentioned such appellations[7,9]. During the Republican era, Liang Qichao's *Biography of Li Hongzhang* and British journalist John Otway Percy Bland's writings also recorded Li Hongzhang's appellation as the "Oriental Bismarck." [4,10]

Considering that Bismarck had already retired from the German Empire by 1896, this appellation must have appeared much earlier and was not originated from Western media. In fact, there were also comparisons made between Li and former British Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone and former U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant during the same period, as recorded in Liang Qichao's *Biography of Li Hongzhang*. [11] Given that the active political periods of Bismarck, Gladstone, and Grant in Western politics were mainly in the 1870s and 1880s, which coincided with the period when Li Hongzhang, as Prime Minister, dominated the Self-Strengthening Movement, such comparisons might have emerged during that period. Another piece of evidence is from 1892, at the first graduation ceremony of the Hong Kong College of Medicine, where Principal James Cantlie mentioned Li Hongzhang as "the Bismarck of China," highlighting Li's influential role in the powerful Beiyang Fleet at the time. This indicates that the comparison between the two was a commonly accepted notion among both Chinese and foreigners at that time. However, it is still insufficient to deduce the exact time of the appearance of this appellation. A widely circulated claim on the internet today suggests that when a German Navy Minister called Conrad visited China in 1880, he compared Li Hongzhang, the leader of the Beiyang Fleet, to his own country's Chancellor Bismarck. This claim is popular on internet platforms, leading many modern online media outlets to quote it without verification. Although this claim is widely circulated, its source is unsupported by other archives and is likely from a historical novel titled *The Complete Biography of Li Hongzhang*, published in 2011[12]. Moreover, it conflicts with German history—during the era of the German Empire and Emperor William I, the government structure established the Imperial Navy Department in 1872, and the commanders of the Navy Department included Alfred von Stosch, Leo von Caprivi, and Alexander von Monts until 1889, when the Imperial Navy Department was divided into three agencies: the Naval Command, the National Navy Department, and the Naval Office. Looking back at the officials who served during the existence of the Navy Department, there was no such figure as "Conrad" during Li Hongzhang's time. Additionally, it is even not a common German name, indicating that this claim is likely to be fabricated or erroneous. However, the popularity of such fictional historical narratives reflects the public's deep cultural demand for strong national policies and national heroes and how these demands are expressed and reshaped in cultural narratives.

In exploring the origin of the appellation "Oriental Bismarck," some studies on the modern history of Sino-German relations provide important clues. Sun Lie mentioned this point, indicating that Alfred Krupp, the founder of the Krupp armament factory, established a connection with Li Hongzhang, who was then involved in the initial preparations for the Beiyang Fleet in the 1870s, to promote armaments. The two developed a friendship through correspondence. In one of the letters, Krupp complimented Li Hongzhang as the "Bismarck of China," a compliment readily accepted by Li Hongzhang[13]. This indicates that during the 1870s, when Bismarck was just beginning to rise to prominence in Europe, China, which had been embroiled in the aftermath of the Opium Wars and the wave of world colonialism, also simultaneously accepted such information.

So why did the Qing Dynasty, Japan, and people in many other backward nations all have a special admiration for Bismarck among many Western modern figures?

4. Under the worship of Bismarck: A vision of powerful statism and a deny to the Classic West

The popularity of the appellation "Oriental Bismarck" and the legends or misconceptions surrounding its origin reflect many interesting realities. For Li Hongzhang himself, this title signifies a common expectation or impression from contemporaries in both the East and the West. It suggests that Li Hongzhang was believed to have the ability to be compared to Otto von Bismarck, the influential Chancellor of the German Empire, in saving the ancient and endangered empire of China. Similar appellations, such as "Oriental Gladstone" or "Oriental Napoleon," and even "Oriental Paris," have become common examples, but perhaps because of Germany's history of transitioning from a divided German Confederation to becoming Europe's leading industrial power, Bismarck eventually became the "chosen one."

Another equally important point: the uniqueness of the "Oriental Bismarck" lies in its implicit denial of the purely Western nature of modernity. This denial stems from the differences between Germany and other earlier Western colonial empires such as Netherlands, Britain and France in terms of rise time, national systems, ethnic cultures, and economic systems. Germany was once a country that adopted a militaristic model, established a powerful authoritarian system, and emerged as the main challenger to the old modern order dominated by Britain by initiating two World Wars. However, this uniqueness was overlooked after World War II, as Germany's international position plummeted and its transition to a democratic system took place[14].

As a typical "latecomer" nation, Germany's victory over France in 1870 to some extent constituted an exemplary rise of a backward nation. Meissner, W. argues that in the cognition of Chinese intellectuals in modern times, Germany is not part of the "West," but rather a more special presence with some "Eastern" characteristics[14]. Indeed, as the precursor to the German Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia was not the core of European culture and civilization for a long time. The broader German region in the east, including Prussia, Silesia, and Hungary, was not only ethnically complex but also served as a bulwark against eastern "barbarians," including Slavs, Hungarians, and Turks, for Western Europe. Germany's uniqueness was also reinforced and affirmed in the psychological realm of modern Germans through the praise of German nationalism in Rankean historiography. Meissner believes that traditional cultural forces and the centralized model played important roles in Germany's rise, and its military strength reflects the feasibility of a "non-Western" model[14]. In fact, for Qing dynasty China, Japan and Germany during the period of the 1870s to 1890s, becoming a military power was a recognized path and vision, the only difference is that Qing China failed. In 1896, when Li Hongzhang met Bismarck, he inquired about the path to becoming a strong nation, to which Bismarck replied that it involved establishing and mastering a powerful military and gaining the trust and support of the ruler[7]. Although Bismarck modestly claimed to be unfamiliar with the realities of other countries, on this point, he and Li Hongzhang reached a common awareness. If viewing military strength as a core to strengthen nations was only a shared view between Li Hongzhang and Bismarck, then in the era after Li Hongzhang, the prevalent view among rulers of the Qing Dynasty was even more evident in their imitation of the German political system. After Li Hongzhang's death, Empress Dowager Cixi, who experienced the Boxer Rebellion, finally realized that China's backwardness lay in its political system and announced preparations for a constitutional monarchy, with Germany once again becoming a model. In the anticipated reform plan of Cixi, "constitutional monarchy" became an important aspect, although she herself did not want to relinquish supreme imperial power. Under this basic understanding, the German constitutional model became a reference point, with the

Imperial German constitutional model retaining the power of absolute monarchy. At the same time, Japan also became a model of learning German model—Japan's constitutional reforms during the Meiji era similarly referenced the German model, and its victories over the Qing Dynasty and Tsarist Russia have greatly shocked the Qing ruler. In this context, the last reform of the Qing Dynasty chose Germany and Japan as models, ultimately resulting in the so-called "royal cabinet" debacle. Even until the 1930s, when fascism rose in Germany, the relationship between the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek and Nazi Germany was very ambiguously closed for a period of time. Based on that, German helped Chiang Kai-shek's government in Nanjing establishing many military collaborations. This honeymoon relationship lasted until the establishment of the Axis powers of Japan, Germany, and Italy, after which Sino-German relations began to deteriorate.

Although today, as a member of the G7, Germany is generally perceived as a typical part of the West, one cannot ignore the fact that the Germany that once initiated two world wars did not always align completely with the "mainstream" Western world in the past two centuries. This is a confusion created by contemporary geopolitics.

Therefore, when the appellation "Oriental Bismarck" emerged, it represented the modern Chinese people's expectation and vision for the country's prosperity through military strength and also implied admiration for political strongmen. This is why the appellation "Oriental Bismarck" became a fundamental basis for evaluation, and it reflects the participation and modernization practices of newly emerged countries that successfully modernized, like China, Japan, Singapore, or South Korea. In the construction of their modernity, highlighting traditional culture, partly denial of the typical "Western" norms, and demands for powerful leaders and ethnic strength became keys to their modernity.

5. Oriental Bismarck and Nationalism: An alternative narrative of modernity

The appellation "Oriental Bismarck" among all the alternative names for Li Hongzhang holds a special academic significance in terms of scholarly reflection. Firstly, titles like "Oriental Someone" are important manifestations of the challenge posed by colonialism and Western modernity to the centrality of the Celestial Empire in discursive power. They represent an important "empirical" substitution from the perspective of Foucauldian archaeology of knowledge. Secondly, in the dominant narrative of modernism, through the imitation and admiration of Bismarck and the opposition and negation of the West, people have constructed a nationalist-style interpretation of modernity.

Generally speaking, nationalism is believed to have originated from the formation of national consciousness in frequent wars in Europe since the 17th century. Ernest Gellner argues that nationalism is a concept "manufactured" in industrial society, explaining the Western origin of nationalism[15]. Benedict Anderson's theory of the "imagined community" more precisely explains how nationalism spread in colonies and became a theoretical weapon used by the people of colonized countries to resist imperialism[16]. Taking Li Hongzhang's "Oriental Bismarck" and Okubo Toshimichi's "Orient Bismarck" as examples, the admiration for "Bismarck" and the preference for the "German model" reflect a "catch-up mentality" and theoretical practice of backward countries. There still inevitably exists a binary opposition between East and West, ultimately giving rise to a form of nationalist modernity as a form of resistance to colonial and imperialist modernity. These studies on nationalism collectively illustrate a mode of anti-Western thinking that spreads with modernization—the process of the spread of nationalism, while also explaining why modernity originated from the West and spread with colonialism but eventually, when implemented in colonized countries, was practiced through a narrative of anti-Westernism.

6. Conclusion

The appellation "Oriental Bismarck" for Li Hongzhang actually embodies a unique modernity construction of late-developing countries in the East, such as China. Bismarck is undoubtedly a modernizer of the German nation, who led the unification of Germany, established the modern state system of Germany, and pioneered the rudimentary system of the welfare state. At the same time, Bismarck was a nationalist who opposed the old order in the West. The German Empire he helped establish continuously challenged the traditional Western order over the next half-century. It became an exemplar for Eastern countries like China and Japan, but also served as a profound lesson in history due to the two World Wars it initiated. However, through the appellation "Oriental Bismarck," people should acknowledge that modernity, as a complex entity, although originating from the West, when participated in by "non-Western" or "less-Western" civilizations, ultimately deconstructed Western modernity due to geopolitical inequality and collective worship of nationalism. In today's East Asian society, people's admiration for industrial wonders and reverence for nationalism, as well as the preservation and rejection to varying degrees in certain cultural inertia, indicate that modernity is either not absolutely present or not absolutely singular.

References

- [1] W Said, E. (2016). *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. India: Penguin Books Limited.
- [2] Foucault, M. (2014). *L'archéologie du savoir*. Paris: Editions Gallimard.
- [3] Iwata, M. (1964). *Ōkubo Toshimichi: The Bismarck of Japan*. Univ of California Press.
- [4] Liang Qichao. (2016). *Bibliography of Li Hongzhang*. Beijing: Zhong Hua Book Company.
- [5] Liang Siguang. (1951). *The Treacherous History of Li Hongzhang*. Beijing: Zhi Shi Shu Dian Press.
- [6] Cao Haidong. (2019). *A Textual Study on the Construction of Li Hongzhang's Image in High School History Textbooks*. Northwestern Normal University.
- [7] Zhao Shengwei. (2019). *Western Mirror: Overseas Historical Materials on Li Hongzhang*. Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Publishing House, 175-179.
- [8] Authored by Lobbekt, Robert; translated by Zheng Shoukang. (2022). *Letters from Lobbekt, Robert, Chief Instructor of the Jiangnan Army Land Academy*, p. 91.
- [9] Yanchevitski, D. (1983). *The Eyewitness Account of the Eight-Nation Alliance*. p. 369.
- [10] John Otway Bland; translated by Xu Zhijing. (2012). *Li Hongzhang Biography: Forty Years of Life in China by a British Journalist*. Hefei: Anhui People's Publishing House.
- [11] Yuan Shuyi. (1997). *The Relationship between the Sun and Li Families in the Boxer Rebellion and the Chinese Political Situation*. Hebei Academic Journal, 2, 91-98.
- [12] Zhao Fanyu, Sun Liangzhu. (2011). *The Complete Biography of Li Hongzhang*. Wuhan: Huazhong University of Science and Technology Press.
- [13] Sun Lie. (2011). *The Thinking and Channels of Introducing Military Equipment during the Late Qing Dynasty in the Preparation of the Beiyang Fleet: Starting from a Signed Letter from Li Hongzhang to Krupp*. *Studies in Dialectics of Nature*, 27(06), 93-97.
- [14] Meissner, W. (2006). *China's search for cultural and national identity from the nineteenth century to the present*. *China perspectives*, 2006(68), 41-54.
- [15] Gellner, E. (2008). *Nations and nationalism*. Cornell University Press.
- [16] Anderson, B. (2002). *Imagined Community: reflectios the Origin and Spread of Natonalism*.