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Ideas of revolution in China and the West

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Abstract Revolution is an event that had taken place in many countries in the 20th century. Revolution was not only imagined in Western historical writing as a radical change of social life, but also perceived as representing a return to the old form of social rule in the end. The Chinese ideas of revolution in the 20th century evolved from the traditional idea that the change of dynasties was due to the change of mandate. The modern Chinese idea of revolution also incorporated the European idea that revolution would lead to a higher form of social development. The interpretation of the aim of Chinese revolution in the 20th century China shows that Chinese theorists had a misunderstanding for a long time regarding revolution as representing an ultimate social state and not as a means to achieve political modernization. A theoretical rethinking of the concept after the Cultural Revolution has resulted in an advance in China's social evolution.

Keywords revolution, the West, China, modernization

摘要 革命是 20 世纪具有世界历史普遍意义的事件。革命在西方历史编纂中既被想象为是社会发展的突变和质变，也被想象为会终结于向旧制度的某种形式的回归。20 世纪中国的革命理念是在传统天命论王朝更迭观念的基础上，吸收了关于革命会通向社会演化更高阶段的欧洲理论而发展出来的。回顾 20 世纪中国思想界对中国革命所要达到的目的的认知可见：思想界曾一度在把革命看作是代表一种终极完善政治状态，还是仅是实现现代化的手段途径上存在误区。文革后在理论上的拨乱反正，促成了中国历史的真正飞跃。

关键词 革命，西方，中国，现代化

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Revolution is an important concept. It lies in the centre of the political ideology of the 20th century. A brief discussion of the concept would be useful and it might shed some light for our understanding of the 20th century world history. In the *Penguin Dictionary of Politics*, revolution was defined as “a violent and total change in a political system which not only vastly alters the distribution of power in the society, but results in major changes in the whole social structure.” It emphasized the event of “the deliberate, intentional, and violent overthrow of one ruling class by another which leads the mobilized masses against the existing system.”¹ Based upon such a connotation, this essay proceeds to a comparative discussion of the ideas of revolution in China and the West.

1 Concepts of revolution in the West

The origin of the Western notion of revolution is generally traced to ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. In late antiquity, the Latin term *revolut* was first used in the non-political sense of “movement.” From the Histories of Polybius (203-120 B.C.), emerged a vision of political institutions changed in a limited number of forms that alternated according to natural principles, monarchy, tyranny, aristocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and anarchy.² 16th century Florentine historians, such as Jacopo Nardi and Francesco Guicciardini, used *revolusioner* to describe recent changes in their city’s government. They assumed that these changes represented a cyclical return to the order of the past.³

During the Enlightenment and the French Revolution period, the word revolution became linked to the idea of historical change as progress toward a new open future. It was from this idea that the modern sense of a profound change that inaugurates a new social order or stage in world history emerged. However, the ancient connotations of perpetual return have not been lost. Many famous writings on revolution all contain a residue of the Greek cyclical idea. For instance, in the writings by Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Crane Brinton, although revolution was presented as an irreversible break with the past, it was also described as a return to certain old forms.

In Edmund Burke’s *Reflection on the Revolution in France* (1790), he predicted that France’s break with authority would culminate in another form of authoritarianism.⁴ de Tocqueville’s *Old Regime and the French Revolution* (1860) suggests that Napoleon’s regime echoed the centralizing policies of the Bourbon

¹ David Robertson, 1985, 290–291.

² Ernst Breisach, 1994, 47.

³ Harry Ritter, 1986, 389.

⁴ Edmund Burke, 1961.

monarchs.⁵ Brinton's *Anatomy of Revolution* (1965) also stresses the tendency for revolutionary extremism to generate authoritarian counterrevolution.⁶ Other scholars such as Kramnick identify a pattern that culminates in the re-glorification of authority. Yet, the restoration of the old forms is not an exact copy of the old order; rather, "it melds ideas of old and new into an ironic spiral in which revolution yields fundamental change in specific relations and institutions, despite that social forms resulted are reminiscent of traditional structures."⁷ This general pattern of post-revolution development seemed to be applicable to cases of revolution not only in the West but also in many other places in the world.

Western scholars tend to look at revolution much more theoretically and comprehensively. For Peter Calvert, revolution refers to the "process by which significant groups become disenchanted with an incumbent government or regime and move into opposition to it," and the "event, by which that government is overthrown by force or by the convincing threat of the use of force." Moreover, he describes the other aspects of a "revolution," such as the description of "the program by which a successor government attempts to change some or all of the major postulates of the society for which it has assumed responsibility," and the referring to "a political myth, a story which describes less how things were than what they ought ideally to have been."⁸

American scholars, for instance, C. Black and S. Huntington, nevertheless, approach revolution from a historical perspective. Black sees that the transition of a traditional society to a modern one involves the transfer of a political power to modernization leaders. The traditional leaders were often reluctant to hand over their power. A revolution is therefore necessary. This phenomenon of revolution can be observed world-widely in most transitional societies.

Huntingdon also interprets revolution as a means to achieve political modernity. He argued that revolution is most likely to happen in those societies where modernization has initiated but political progress was very slow. Revolution is a sudden, violent, and radical change of prevalent political ideology, value system, social structure, policy, as well as leaders and institutions. In his view, revolution is fundamentally a phenomenon of the Western culture, since it can only be possible to be conceived in modern Western world view. The most important idea of this world outlook is the belief that human kind is able to control and change the world he lives in.⁹

⁵ Alexis de, Tocqueville, 1998.

⁶ Crane Brinton, 1965.

⁷ Issac Kramnick, 1972, 59.

⁸ Peter Calvert, 1970; Milton Keynes, 1990, 17.

⁹ Huntington P. Samuel, 1968.

Other scholars such as Chalmers Johnson takes a functionalist and cybernetics view point, interpreting revolution as the result of a multiple dysfunction of a social system. He argues that social system has to perform certain functions in order to survive over time. "Equilibrium in the system is maintained by satisfying needs and repelling challenges to the regime." Grievances are collectively seen as "dysfunction—aspects of the system that are not working properly lead to the alienation of many sectors of society,"¹⁰ preparing the necessary condition for social revolution.

2 Ideas of revolution in China

Obviously, revolution designating radical social and political changes is comparatively a modern concept. Its crystallization was only possible in the context of a special modern outlook on the world. Revolution is often connected to the turbulent social upheavals and radical change of social institution, values, and political ideology. It is in many cases a means for traditional societies to achieve modernization. Revolution most likely happens in those societies where political development has lagged behind, while some socio-economic changes have taken place. Such background, as observed in many other parts of the world and as analyzed by the Western scholars, also marked the context of the emergence of the ideas of revolution in China.

The origin of modern Chinese idea of revolution can be traced back to the late 19th century when China's radical gentry-scholars and political activists realized that it was no longer possible to rely on the old regime to regenerate China so as to meet the Western challenge and tackle mounting social and economic problems.

In ancient Chinese political thought, the idea of revolution in its modern Western meaning did not exist. The term *geming*, the Chinese counterpart for English word revolution, first appeared designating the change of dynasties. For instance, in the *Books of Changes*, it reads: "The changes in Heaven and earth bring forth four seasons; the revolution, which set up the new dynasty and overthrew the old dynasty, made by King Tang of the Shang and King Wu of the Zhou, followed the Mandate of Heaven and responded to the people's demand."

In classical Chinese, *ge* means "to renew, to change, and to discard the old." *Ming* means "the order from the heaven, the mandate of the heaven." As a verb, *geming* signifies "to drive somebody to do something, or, to give order." The term "revolution" in classical Chinese philosophy therefore means the overthrow of the old dynasty and the establishment of the new one according to the

¹⁰ Chalmers Johnson, 1964, 8.

mandate of heaven.¹¹ As believed, the righteous emperor had the Mandate of Heaven. If he lost it, he lost the legitimacy.

Revolution became a central term in political discourse after the failure of the “Hundred Days” Reform in 1898. Opposing the idea put forward by reformers like Kang Youwei that constitutional monarchy could save China, anti-Manchu revolutionaries like Sun Yat-sen believed that “it is absolutely unlikely that the monarchy would carry out socio-political reform themselves.” Revolution was therefore necessary.¹² One of the most famous pieces of writings propagating the idea of revolution was Zou Rong’s “The Revolutionary Army” published in 1903. Zou likened the Chinese revolution he envisaged to which had taken place in Britain, France, and the United States. Its aim was to overthrow the Qing Dynasty and to establish a new political and economic system. Zou believed that revolution as a movement towards (a higher) civilization was in agreement with the law of the universe. “The reasons for the revolution” were to save China from becoming a colony like India. The primary aim was to establish a political system similar to American political system.”¹³

However, in this notion of revolution, the link to its traditional Chinese sense was still observable. For instance, in his speech to the American people, Sun Yat-sen argued that Chinese history suggested that “the life of a dynasty, like a human being, had its birth, growth, maturity, decline, and death. The Manchu’s imperial rule had already begun to decline since the early 19th century, and it now rapidly approached its death stage. To save China is our duty.”¹⁴

In another article entitled “The Importance of a Democratic Revolution in China” (1905), Sun Yat-sen also envisaged a revolution which would usher in a new political system.¹⁵ He argued that a republic must be established so to “begin reform from the top.” Sun criticized the idea that a republic was not suitable for China as “opposing the law of social evolution.”

On the platform of China’s first modern political party, “The Declaration of Tongmenghui” (1905), Sun connected revolution to a program of socio-political re-organization and envisaged three stages in the development of constitutional democracy: 1) rule by martial law; 2) civil rule under the supervision of military authorities; and 3) constitutional government.¹⁶ Huang Xin, the early leader of the GMD (Guomindang, or the Nationalist Party), also associated revolution with the implementation of a new set of policies in the military, transport, foreign affairs, and juridical fields. He believed that the implementation of those

¹¹ Duan Yucai, 1950, 384, 57, 107; *Ci yuan* (Xiuding ben), 1950, 307.

¹² Sun Yat-sen, “Zhongguo wenti de zhenjie.”

¹³ Zou Rong, 411–413.

¹⁴ Sun Yat-sen, “Zhongguo wenti de zhen jie.”

¹⁵ Ibid., “Zhongguo minzhu geming zhi zhongyao.”

¹⁶ Ibid., “Tongmenghui xuanyan.”

policies after the revolution would improve the wealth of the people and the nation.

The notion that revolution would usher in a new phase in the evolution of civilization emerged in 1915. In his comparison of the Chinese revolution and the French Revolution, Chen Duxiu, the leader of radical young intellectuals and the future founder of the CCP(Chinese Communist Party) declared that revolution would establish a new modern civilization, like that first created by the French Revolution. He believed that though China was in the modern world, “its civilization had not broken away from its ancient form.” Current Chinese society therefore represented the survival of the ancient civilization whereas France represented “modern civilization.” The characteristics of modern civilization embraced such ideas as human rights, socialism, and so on.¹⁷

The debate on Eastern and Western Cultures brought the idea of fundamental change in culture into close association with the concept of revolution. Radical intellectuals all believed that China was backward because her culture (ethical norms and values etc.) was outdated. Therefore, China had to abandon “its intrinsic culture” and adopt the “foreign Western culture.” Li Dazhao also described a dying Chinese civilization waiting to be revitalized by the import of the good and strong elements of Western civilization.¹⁸ These ideas paved the way for the emergence of the conception of revolution as cultural and political changes leading toward a modern civilization.

Based on his contrast of Western modern civilization with China’s old culture or “Medieval ages”, Chen Duxiu held that the only way for China to get out of its vulnerable position was to be Europeanized. Hu Shi later elaborated this idea, postulating that backward countries could only catch up with the West through Westernization. In the debate between Chen, Hu, and those such as Liang Shuming who insisted that China could and should rely on some of, or essential parts of, its tradition in its future development, the term “modernization” was coined as a neutral term describing the process of acquiring those “universal” characteristics of modern societies which first emerged in the West.

Modernization as a concept denoting a historical process was crystallized during the 1929–1933. In 1929, Hu Shi used the expression “wholehearted modernization” in an article entitled “The Conflicts of Cultures.” In June 1933, to celebrate its first anniversary of publication, *Shanghai* based newspaper Shenbao compiled a special issue on the problems of China’s modernization. About 26 articles were carried in the newspaper discussing two central issues: 1) the difficulties and obstacles of China’s modernization; and 2) the proper road

¹⁷ Chen Duxiu.

¹⁸ Li Dazhao.

for China to take towards modernization. In the view of these authors, modernization mainly involved the development of natural sciences, industry, the cultivation of scientific thinking, and the rationalization of ideas, attitudes and social behavior.

The 1919 Russian Revolution and the introduction of Leninist theory into China in the late 1920s greatly influenced the discourse on revolution. The content and meaning of the Chinese Marxist idea of revolution differed much from that of GMD and others. Yet, this idea of revolution was still a product of the grand historical context of China's search for modernity. What differentiated the CCP's idea from others' was its conception of the nature of the future new society and the nature of the existing Chinese and Western societies then. For those who converted to Leninism, revolution would culminate in the establishment of a socialist society with the Soviet Union as its prototype. This socialism was more advanced than modern capitalism and emerged as the negation of capitalist society. Revolution from now on must reject traditional Chinese culture as well as modern capitalist culture.

Eastern culture, according to Qu Qiubai, the early leader of the CCP, "stood still between patrimonial and feudal societies," while "Western culture at the present has already become Capitalism and Imperialism." The main aim of the revolution hence was to "overthrow patrimonial and feudal social system," and to oppose imperialism.

This represented an important landmark in the evolution of the concept of revolution in 20th century China. In this new outlook of revolution, Leninism-influenced Chinese intellectuals and political activists had a quite different view concerning the policies to be implemented after the revolution. Marxist and Leninist categories hereto entered into the discourse on revolution. Chinese revolution, according to Qu Qiubai, would "fulfill the task of transforming the man-to-man relationship"(social relations), and "completely reform the organization of production," so as "to raise productivity greatly." The revolution would also "collectivize distribution and production management institutions," "implement carefully planned economic policies," wipe out "all cosmopolitan civilization" and "advance spiritual civilization." Meanwhile, the revolution should "resort to class struggle in its ideological aspect," "to overthrow modern civilization" and should develop "socialist art and civilization."¹⁹

Qu believed that after the revolution, "society could be reorganized according to scientific principles time and again in a manner similar to the change of a setting in a theatre, or like children playing with their toys, all for purely aesthetic

¹⁹ Qu Qiubai.

taste.”²⁰ From this concept of revolution, one can see the origins of many basic policies carried out in the period from 1950 to 1970, including those utopian ideas such as the organization of people’s communes, the abolishing of family kitchens and the establishment of collective restaurants, as well as the ultra-leftist thinking prevalent in the Cultural Revolution.

The Chinese Marxist idea of revolution obviously differed from the ideas put forward earlier by others. Socialism was still viewed as a type of modern social systems and revolution was viewed as a means to realize modernization. Yet, what distinguished the CCP’s idea of revolution with the others, was its special understanding of modernity and its approach to it. The aim of Chinese revolution was not to establish a modern capitalist society but a modern socialist society with Chinese character.

3 Conclusion

Revolution is presented as a paradoxical combination of the new and the repetitive, or in other words, a deviation from normal states of social stability and returns to the states of equilibrium. It is from this fundamental contradiction between revolutionary policies and the aim the revolution intended to achieve that we can have a clearer insight into the many setbacks and turmoil of those great revolutions in modern world history.

Thirty years after China’s return from revolutionary hyperbole to modernization, China has significantly changed. The great changes which have taken place during our generation, the improvement of productivity and the rise of living standards, can only be suitably described by the language Marx once used when he remarked on the enormous increase of wealth which capitalism had brought to human society in the 200 years of capitalist development. That one fifth of the world’s population has made such remarkable progress is something which should be celebrated.

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²⁰ Ibid.

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