

## SEEDS OF MAO ZEDONG THOUGHT: TWO PROTOTYPICAL EXAMPLES OF THE DISCOURSE OF REVOLUTION IN MODERN CHINA

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In March 1958 Mao Zedong gathered thirty-eight top leaders of the Chinese Communist Party for a work conference in Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan. At the Chengdu Conference, which lasted from March 8 to March 26, Mao continued to criticize a group of economic planners for their opposition to “rash advance,” as he had done at a smaller work conference held in Nanning in January, and pushed for the Great Leap Forward, a drive he had initiated in late 1957 to increase productivity in both industry and agriculture. In the six speeches he delivered at the Chengdu Conference he repeatedly stressed the role of human consciousness and will in the making of history, embracing the visionary goals of communism while turning a blind eye to the Marxist-defined material preconditions for communism. Meanwhile, as he succeeded in pressuring his colleagues to come to his side, his views were incorporated into thirty-seven draft documents, mostly on economic issues such as how to develop local industries and how to amalgamate agricultural cooperatives. Gaining the upper hand in the economic realm, Mao effectively laid the groundwork for the imminent intensification of the Great Leap Forward.<sup>1</sup>

In the course of the Chengdu Conference Mao unexpectedly distributed to the attendees a booklet he had personally compiled and titled *The Jiangsu Daily Case* (Subao an), a booklet that had Zou Rong’s *The Revolutionary Army* and Zhang Taiyan’s “A Rebuttal to Kang Youwei’s Letter on Revolution” as its centerpieces, accompanied by two appendixes, one an account of the *Jiangsu Daily* case, a widely-publicized lawsuit brought by the Qing government in 1903 against the newspaper in an attempt to suppress its revolutionary propaganda, and the other a short essay on Zhang Taiyan, written by the renowned writer Lu Xun in October 1936.<sup>2</sup> As Mao tried to persuade his

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- 1 Chen Mingxian, *Wannian Mao Zedong* (Mao Zedong’s Last Years) (Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 1998), 162-71.
  - 2 Zhou Yong, Cai Fei, “Zou Rong yu Subao an—bainian zhihou jiyu xin shiliao yu xin shijiao de tantao” (Zou Rong and the *Jiangsu Daily* Case—A Discussion Based on Newly Discovered Historical Evidence and New Perspectives One Hundred Years after the Event), in *Zou Rong yu Subao an dang’an shiliao huibian* (A Collection of Archival Materials on Zou Rong and the *Jiangsu Daily* Case), ed. Zhou Yong (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 2013), 1-58, 56.

colleagues to overcome their lingering concern over economic adventurism and to shift the Great Leap Forward into high gear, why did he ask them to read these two texts, first published in 1903 as two of the earliest examples of the discourse of revolution in modern China? What messages did the two texts contain that still remained inspiring and instructive to Mao at a time when the Chinese revolution had already entered its socialist stage? To answer these questions in this essay, I will sort out elements in Zou's and Zhang's works that would chart a direction for Mao's thinking about revolution. Keeping in mind that Zou and Zhang expressed their views on revolution to urge people to take action in the real world, I will not only highlight their influence on Mao but also point out the practical implications and, no less importantly, inadequacies of their views. As we shall see at the end of this essay, their views on revolution, particularly their belief in the power of revolution to reshape the world in short order, would contribute to the Utopian thinking and practice in the Great Leap Forward.

While recognizing the long-term impact of Zou and Zhang, I will also try not to lose sight of their historical environment. After all, they wrote not to influence a distant future but to point out a direction for their own era, a direction they, as radical revolutionaries, tried to distinguish sharply from the direction advocated by the reformers, particularly Kang Youwei, the architect of the short-lived 1898 reforms. To understand Zou and, especially, Zhang contextually, we need to bring into the picture Kang Youwei's opposition to revolution, clarified in a 1902 open letter to a group of overseas Chinese in South and North America. For that reason I will include Kang's letter in my discussion. In the course of my discussion I will explain how Kang's worry about the consequences of violent revolution and about the local conditions in China compelled him to argue for gradualist reform as the only option for China. Just as I do with Zou's and Zhang's views on revolution, I will search out the practical implications of Kang's stand. With hindsight we can argue that, if followed, Kang's advice could and would have prevented countless excesses and tragedies of Mao's revolution. Unfortunately, in reality Mao only followed the path blazed by Zou and Zhang, paying heavy prices along the way. With the heavy prices now in plain sight, it is time for us to rehabilitate Kang with a fair assessment of his position.

### **Revolution as Incessant Competition and Struggle**

Writing *The Revolutionary Army* in 1902 and 1903 during his stay in Japan, where he became radicalized along with many other Chinese students, Zou Rong had Western prototypes in mind as he imagined a revolution in China. As Frank Li notes, the American Revolution, resulting in the constitution, laws of self-government and structure of government offices in the United States, served as a model for Zou's dream of a revolution in China.<sup>3</sup> An equally, if not more, important inspiration came from the French Revolution, particularly as it was depicted by Thomas Carlyle in *The*

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3 Frank Li, "East is East and West is West: Did the Twain Ever Meet? The Declaration of Independence in China." *The Journal of American History* 85.4 (March 1999): 1432-48, 1442-44.

*French Revolution: A History*. According to a transcript of a hearing conducted on December 4, 1903 before the Mixed Court in the International Settlement in Shanghai, Zou told the court he had read Carlyle's work, and works by John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer, in Japan.<sup>4</sup> Written with the author's "heart's blood," as described by Carlyle himself in an entry he put down in his journal on March 22, 1836,<sup>5</sup> *The French Revolution* is a work marked by a passionate and energetic style. Behind the style lies Carlyle's philosophy of anti-mechanism, a philosophy holding the view that the universe is fundamentally an expression or incarnation of a cosmic life.<sup>6</sup> To Carlyle the French Revolution typified this process, just like titanic natural forces such as whirlwind, tidal wave, or volcanic eruption.

In the first chapter of *The Revolutionary Army* we come across the following statement that reminds us of Carlyle's view of the French Revolution: "Revolution is the universal principle of evolution. Revolution is the universal principle of the world. Revolution is the essential message for the life-and-death struggle in a time of transition. Revolution accords with heaven and corresponds with human needs. Revolution rejects what is corrupt and keeps what is good. Revolution transforms barbarism into civilization. Revolution turns slaves into masters."<sup>7</sup> However, as he saw revolution, especially political revolution, as an exclusively progressive force in history, Zou Rong distinguished himself from Carlyle, who fully understood the danger of regression in violent political revolution, as shown in his despairing descriptions of sansculottism in *The French Revolution*. What brought about Zou's unqualified exaltation of revolution? The answer lies in the influence of Herbert Spencer, whose emphasis on competition as a permanent necessity in evolutionary progress, in turn creatively interpreted by Yan Fu, provided guidance for Zou in his search for the right way to save China. As Benjamin Schwartz notes, in Yan Fu's interpretation of Herbert Spencer the value of struggle, namely energy asserted within a competitive situation for the purpose of actualizing potentialities, is stressed to the degree that the image of "nature red in tooth and claw" becomes exhilarating rather than depressing.<sup>8</sup> Like Yan Fu, Zou Rong views

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4 Wang Min, trans, "Subao an shenxun jilu" (Transcripts of the Hearings on the *Jiangsu Daily* Case], in *Subao an yanjiu* (A Study of the *Jiangsu Daily* Case) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2010), 156-209, 182.

5 John D. Rosenberg, *Carlyle and the Burden of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 16.

6 John Holloway, "The Life of Carlyle's Language," in *Thomas Carlyle*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 17-31, 18.

7 Zou Rong, *Geming jun* (The Revolutionary Army), in *Zou Rong ji* (A Zou Rong Compilation), ed. Zhou Yong (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 2011), 195-260, 198. [Note: After consulting John Lust's *The Revolutionary Army: A Chinese Nationalist Tract of 1903* (The Hague: Mouton, 1968), I have made some modifications in my translations of excerpts from *Geming jun*.]

8 Benjamin Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 46.

competition as the manifestation of a single cosmic principle that works its way to preserve the fit and eliminate the unfit. In the political realm competition crystallizes into political revolution that pushes the human world toward a state of health.

While understanding competition as the “law of life,” this equation of revolution with competition justifies natural selection in the human world. In so doing it overlooks certain pernicious consequences of unbridled competition. According to this view, the unfit, whether they are nations, races, classes or individuals, deserve to be defeated and replaced by the fit, all in the name of “progress.” On the other hand, living in a harsh world with no security guarantee, the fit have to adopt a predatory attitude toward the unfit and toward each other, resorting to force to maximize their power position and maintain their domination. In the international arena this view sees the *modus operandi* of imperialism as acceptable, or even commendable, as borne out by Zou Rong’s following dream, unrealized because of the oppression of the Han majority in China by the Manchus, the ruling ethnic minority in the Qing dynasty: “Had we not been trampled underfoot by sinister scoundrels like Nurhaci, Abahai and Fulin, had we been freed from the Manchu yoke long ago, I suspect that England, Russia, Germany and France, now encroaching upon us and dividing us up with bared teeth and brandishing claws, would now be cowering before us with bated breath, fearful of our power and terrified of our might. I suspect, too, that it would be expected that the country responsible for the destruction of India, Poland, Egypt and Turkey would not be a country like England or Russia but would be China.”<sup>9</sup> Ironically, as he laments the fate of China as a victim of Western imperialism, he shows no sympathy for victims of potential Chinese imperialism.

Obviously, what is wrong in Zou Rong’s eyes is not imperialism per se but China’s failure to become an imperialist power. To condemn the Manchus as the cause of this failure and to incite his Han readers to hate the Manchus, he devotes the second chapter, by far the longest chapter in *The Revolutionary Army*, to a list of injustices committed by the Manchus against the Han during the Qing, ranging from restricted government appointments, heavy taxes, cruel tortures to the Qing court’s failure to protect Chinese laborers working overseas. Especially noteworthy is how he puts the evidence of these injustices in front of his readers and makes his readers associate themselves with the victims, even though they are not directly victimized. Take, for example, the way he connects Manchu massacres of the Han in the early Qing with the readers’ own families. After citing from *An Account of Ten Days in Yangzhou* and *An Account of the Massacres in Jiading*, reports of Qing atrocities in southern China in 1645, and asserting that atrocities ten times worse than those recorded in the two accounts must have taken place everywhere in China, he goes on to ask the following questions: “I also say to my fellow countrymen: When the Manchu scoundrels entered the Passes, were not those butchered by them the great-great-grandfathers of your great-great-grandfathers? Were they not the uncles of the great-great-grandfathers of your great-great-grandfathers? Were not those raped by the Manchu scoundrels the wives,

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9 Zou Rong, 230-31.

daughters or sisters of the great-great-grandfathers of your great-great-grandfathers?"<sup>10</sup> Linking the readers' families to the historical trauma, he not only brings the past into the present but also obliges the readers to take revenge.

In Zou Rong's view the injustices the Han have suffered as individuals and families for two hundred and sixty years in the Qing naturally converge into collective experiences. As he recounts these humiliating collective experiences, his emphasis on the Han's victimhood serves not only to stir up hatred against the Manchus but also to strengthen ethnic solidarity among the Han. While highlighting the unbridgeable differences between "us" and "them," he calls on his Han readers to unite and take revenge against their Manchu victimizers, depicted as subhuman because of their alien ethnicity, culture, language and customs. Finally, his emotional appeal reaches its crescendo in the following lines in "The Song of the Flatbread," a ditty attributed to the early Ming court official Liu Bowen (1311-1375) and appended to the earliest editions of *The Revolutionary Army*: "Holding ninety-nine swords in our hands, we will not stop until we kill all Tartars."<sup>11</sup> Consumed by rage, sparked by real and imagined past injustices, he assigns guilt to all Manchus and urges his Han readers to use violence to right historical wrongs. Regrettably, he does not realize that, instead of ushering in a world of justice, revenge in the form of indiscriminate, disproportionate and aggressive violence can only result in a new kind of tyranny, which in turn can lead to more violence as it triggers violent retaliatory actions taken in the name of justice.

As he called for violent revenge against all Manchus Zou Rong was clearly fired by racism in its most virulent form. Here we should recognize the influence of the late Qing discourse of race. As Frank Dikötter notes, the late Qing discourse of race, initiated by Yan Fu, believes that mankind is divided into several permanent racial types that have existed unaltered since their appearance on earth. It also believes that the yellow race is in a perpetual state of war with other races. When the red, brown and black races are eliminated because of their disunity and inability to expand, a final battle for world domination will be waged between the yellows and the whites.<sup>12</sup> The typology of the yellow race Zou Rong offers in the fourth chapter, a chapter titled "For Revolution Races Must Be Clearly Distinguished," proves that he wholeheartedly accepts this discourse, particularly its conviction in the innate differences and hostility among separate races and ethnic groups. As he calls for revolution as an ethnic war against the Manchus, he also demonstrates a traditional Han-centric prejudice against ethnic minorities, as shown in his following remarks: "What you, my fellow countrymen, today call court, government and emperor are what we once called Yi, Man, Rong, Di [Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern Barbarians], Xiongnu and Tartars. Living beyond the Shanhai Pass, these tribes were not by origin the same race as us, illustrious

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10 Zou Rong, 222.

11 In Zhou Yong, ed, *Zou Rong ji* (A Zou Rong Compilation) (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 2011), 138.

12 Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 68.

descendents of the Yellow Emperor. They land is foul. Their race smells of sheep. Their hearts are beasts' hearts. Their customs are tent-dwellers' customs. Their script is different from ours. Their speech is different from ours. Their clothes are different from ours."<sup>13</sup> Significantly, as he subscribes to the traditional view of Han cultural superiority he rejects an important component of this view, namely the belief in the assimilative power of Han culture that allows barbarians to be integrated into the Han world once they adopt Han cultural norms and values. Doomed by their ineradicable differences from the Han and their cultural inferiority, the Manchus, in his view, will forever remain alien to the Han no matter how hard they try to adopt Han culture.

Surprisingly, Zou Rong's racism is intimately intertwined with his rhetoric of human rights. For him revolution, as an ethnic war against the Manchus, is aimed to win the rights of freedom, equality, independence and autonomy for the Han. Here we should note that his embrace of human rights was part of a trend that emerged in China after the 1890s. Late Qing thinking about human rights, as Peter Zarrow points out, originated in revulsion against despotism. Anti-despotism, broadly defined as opposition to social and cultural repression as well as to political autocracy, fueled rights thinking.<sup>14</sup> In this regard Zou Rong's thinking about human rights was no exception. Inspired by anti-despotism, he forcefully condemns the evils of the Manchu rule and, at the same time, calls for the restoration of "natural rights" for the Han.<sup>15</sup> Sadly, however, his advocacy of genocide as the path to human rights shows a disturbing misunderstanding of the spirit of human rights. As Lynn Hunt points out, the spirit of human rights stems from a universalist assumption, which holds that all human beings have certain inherent, natural rights simply by virtue of being human and not by virtue of their status in society, whether that is defined by sex, race, ethnicity, class or nationality.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, Zou Rong, while claiming to accept the notion of natural rights, stops far short of acknowledging the universal applicability of human rights. Holding the Manchus not as fellow human beings but as enemies marked by their irremovable otherness and evilness, he not only refuses to grant rights to them but also legitimizes aggression against them in the name of human rights. In so doing he demonstrates a total lack of "imagined empathy," a disposition that serves as the psychological foundation of democracy and human rights as it acknowledges the fundamental similarities among all human beings.<sup>17</sup> As would be proven by what happened later in the course of the Chinese revolution, this lack of empathy with the enemy would produce devastating consequences.

13 Zou Rong, 228.

14 Peter Zarrow, "Anti-Despotism and 'Rights Talk': The Intellectual Origins of Modern Human Rights Thinking in the Late Qing," *Modern China* 34.2 (April 2008): 179-209, 180.

15 Zou Rong, 233.

16 Lynn Hunt, "The Paradoxical Origins of Human Rights," in *Human Rights and Revolutions*, ed. Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, Lynn Hunt and Marilyn B. Young (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 3-17, 3-4.

17 Lynn Hunt, 13.

### **Gradualism as an Alternative to Revolution**

Alarmed by China's inability to handle devastating internal and external problems, an increasing number of educated Chinese began to feel, around the turn of the century, that China needed to go through a fundamental transformation to survive in the modern world. However, as to how to achieve this transformation the answer was by no means unanimous. As the reformers tried to bring about the needed transformation through institutional reforms, the revolutionaries rejected this peaceful approach and began to agitate for the armed overthrow of the Manchus. Meanwhile, the reformers' concern about violence masquerading as revolution prompted some of them to clarify what revolution truly meant and the difference between revolution and rebellion. Kang Youwei's disciple Liang Qichao, for example, published an article on December 14, 1902 in which he stated that revolution meant the creation of a new world. Since they had all failed in this regard, the armed uprisings in Chinese history had not been revolutions, even though some of them had caused dynastic changes. In Liang's view these repeated armed uprisings in China had amounted to tyranny misunderstood as revolution, ruining the reputation of revolution as a result. On the other hand, with the Meiji Restoration in Japan as an example, he made clear that a true revolution did not have to cause a dynastic change.<sup>18</sup> Recognizing both the limitations of rebellion and the necessity of revolution as the only way to save China, he obviously viewed reform as capable of producing a true revolution with its world-transforming power.

Unlike Liang, Zou Rong was not interested in offering a reasoned analysis of history in his exposition of revolution. To him revolution was a future-oriented project for which human initiative, rather than historical precedents, would determine the outcome. As he emphasized the importance of human initiative he launched a fierce battle against conservative mental habits, condemning, in particular, the slave mentality of the Han. In his view the slave mentality was self-imposed: "If we Han are slaves of the Manchus, Europeans and Americans, it is not because the Manchus, Europeans and Americans wish to enslave us, but because the Han enjoy being slaves."<sup>19</sup> By the same logic the Han could also stop being slaves if they chose to transform themselves after being awakened to the damage caused by the slave mentality. To awaken his readers, Zou urged them to follow the examples of the French Revolution and the American Revolution and turn themselves from subjects into citizens capable of exercising independence and freedom.<sup>20</sup> Apparently, he regarded mental emancipation as essential to revolution.

Zou's attack on the slave mentality would resonate with Mao, especially on the eve of the Great Leap Forward. As Stuart Schram points out, Mao's pursuit of the goal

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18 Liang Qichao, "Shi ge" (An Explication of Revolution), in *Liang Qichao xuanji* (A Selection of Works by Liang Qichao), ed. Li Huaxing, Wu Jiaxun (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1984), 368-73, 368-71.

19 Zou Rong, 247.

20 Zou Rong, 252-53.

of restoring China's dignity and independence had been marked throughout by two traits: a tremendous emphasis on the importance of transforming people's minds as the indispensable condition for transforming society and a taste for things military,<sup>21</sup> both attributable, in my view, to the influence of his predecessors such as Zou Rong. Specifically, in his talk on March 22, 1958 at the Chengdu Conference Mao twice singled out the slave mentality for criticism,<sup>22</sup> showing that he was in total agreement with Zou Rong on this point. I would further argue that domestic influences such as Zou Rong's oriented Mao toward a voluntarist direction that diverged significantly from the view of social revolution in classical Marxism. Believing that social revolution has its roots in the conflict between the material productive forces of society and the existing relations of production, Marx made the following assertion:

No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. Therefore mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast, too impatient to wait for the development of material conditions, both Zou Rong and Mao believed that people could and should accelerate the pace of social revolution by exerting themselves. In other words, instead of seeing social revolution as propelled and conditioned by contradictions in material life, as Marx did, they envisioned social revolution as an enterprise in which human will would act as the primary driving force.

With his conviction in human beings' power to drive history forward, Zou Rong not only declined to accept the past as a predictor of the future but also refused to tie the fate of revolution to the existing conditions in China. Even as he acknowledged that the Han had been burdened by their slave mentality for thousands of years, he still had high hopes for them as he laid out a lofty plan for a revolution in China. Without specifying how the Han could turn themselves from slaves into masters, he remained convinced that, once started, a revolution in China could quickly achieve its coveted results. In short, he simply refused to give any thought to gradualism.

Gradualism, we should note, was precisely the approach embraced by the reformers, as we have seen in Liang Qichao's exposition of reform as the path to a true

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21 Stuart Schram, "Mao Tse-Tung as a Charismatic Leader," *Asian Survey* 7.6 (June 1967): 383-88, 384.

22 Stuart Schram, ed., *Chairman Mao Talks to the People* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 115, 116.

23 Karl Marx, "Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 388-92, 390.



revolution. Before Liang published his article, his mentor Kang Youwei expounded a gradualist position in detail in a 20,000-word open letter written and published in June 1902. Titled “A Letter to Some Overseas Chinese in South and North America on Constitutional Monarchy, Not Revolution, as the Only Option for China,” Kang’s open letter discusses a number of revolution-related issues, including, most importantly, the damage revolution would cause, the inappropriateness of revolution for China and the benefit of constitutional monarchy as an alternative to revolution. Preceding his disciple, Kang uses history, both Chinese history and world history, to make a case against revolution. Take, for example, his warning based on his view of the French Revolution. In sharp contrast to Zou Rong, who emotionally glorifies the French Revolution as a bridge to civilization and freedom, Kang points out that France was the only country in Europe that went through a revolution to achieve constitutionalism and that, after the French Revolution, which gave rise to chaos for eighty years and cost millions of lives, France had failed to improve its well-being to the level reached by other European countries without waging a revolution. To him the example of France proves the inefficacy of revolution beyond any doubt.<sup>24</sup>

Behind Kang’s assessment of the French Revolution lay a pragmatic approach that judged a political program not by its ideal but by its practice and outcome. Keeping history in mind, this approach put the French Revolution to the test of verification and rejected it because of its undesirable consequences. Moreover, with the real world in sight, this approach also recognized the specificities of each country and cautioned against copying a foreign model, even a successful one, without any consideration of local conditions. “Just as one needs a boat to travel on water and a carriage to travel on land, one needs different medicines for different diseases. For each locale and each object there are suitable measures. Some measures are appropriate for that place but not for this place, just as some measures were appropriate for what happened before but not for what would happen later. At present the prescription of revolution and democracy is not suitable for the conditions in China. It can be an empty ideal, but not a practicable program.”<sup>25</sup> Clearly, Kang saw political reform as an incremental process constrained by its own local environment, a process in which feasible ameliorative measures would improve the local environment step by step. According to this view, revolution, with its inappropriately drastic measures, could only destroy the local environment instead of improving it.

Guided by his pragmatic mind-set, Kang held the deposed Emperor Guangxu as the key to China’s future as he criticized the revolutionaries for blindly following Western examples and predicted their unavoidable failure. In his view the emperor had

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24 Kang Youwei, “Da Nan Bei Meizhou zhu huaqiao lun zhongguo zhi ke xing lixian bu ke xing geming shu” (A Letter to Some Overseas Chinese in South and North America on Constitutional Monarchy, Not Revolution, as the Only Option for China), in *Bu xing er yan zhong bu ting ze guo wang* (My Prediction Has Unfortunately Come True/My Country Will Perish If It Does Not Heed My Advice) (Shanghai: Changxing shuju, 1918), 3.

25 Kang Youwei, 20.

already proved himself to be a champion of a wide range of reform policies in 1898. He noted, in particular, that Guangxu had demonstrated his willingness to give power to the people when he supported a proposal to establish a parliament in China in 1898. If the emperor had succeeded with his reforms people in China would have obtained freedom and rights without shedding any blood.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Guangxu's failure in 1898 was by no means irreversible, since the emperor, a young man in his early thirties, could stage a comeback simply by outliving Empress Dowager Cixi and Ronglu, the aged diehard conservatives responsible for crushing the reforms in 1898. With Guangxu back on the throne people in China could then reach the goals of revolution without going through a violent revolution and suffering its consequences.

As he regarded Guangxu as the path to freedom and rights for people in China, Kang made clear that what he objected to was not the ideals of revolution but the measures proposed by the revolutionaries, particularly the incomprehensible clamor for the wholesale annihilation of the Manchus.<sup>27</sup> To him this clamor was incomprehensible because, first, it overlooked the historical fact that since ancient times different ethnic groups in China had intermingled with each other and, as a result, it was now impossible to separate the Han from other ethnic groups, including the Manchus. More importantly, this clamor violated the fundamental moral values upon which Chinese culture had been built. He pointed out that in Chinese history the concept of Chineseness had been used as a reference to a set of moral values, not as an indicator of ethnicity. "What Confucius called the difference between the Chinese and barbarians is what we now call the difference between civilization and barbarism. The [ethnic] identities of the Chinese and barbarians were not fixed permanently and were changing over time. If they were virtuous, barbarians were regarded as Chinese. If they were evil, the Chinese were regarded as barbarians. Such judgments were made for the purpose of moral improvement, not for the purpose of strengthening ethnic solidarity."<sup>28</sup> Seen from this perspective, the clamor for killing all Manchus was patently un-Chinese because of its barbarism. Moreover, if put into practice it would not lead to freedom and rights even for the Han. Instead, it would result in chaos, with strongmen fighting each other for domination before the emergence of a dictator on the scene. A Confucian concerned about people's physical as well as moral welfare, Kang rejected this clamor—the most important plank in the revolutionaries' platform—with a clear awareness of the fundamental incompatibility between means and ends that would forever prevent violent revolution from reaching its putative goals.

To sum up, Kang's pragmatic standpoint led him to reject violent revolution and embrace constitutional monarchy as the only path through which China could reform itself not only peacefully but also effectively. To him constitutional monarchy was superior to violent revolution because it would provide stability and continuity. Most

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26 Kang Youwei, 7.

27 Kang Youwei, 33.

28 Kang Youwei, 35.

significantly, as a form of government in which the monarch would serve as the head of the state under a constitution, it would avoid the danger of dictatorship as it grants rights to the people. In short, unlike violent revolution, it would offer real prospects for security and human rights.

### **Utopian Belief in the Power of Revolution**

Concerned about the influence of Kang's open letter, Zou Rong's older comrade and supporter Zhang Taiyan wrote and published his rebuttal in June 1903 as a shot fired in a heated battle between the reformers and the revolutionaries to win the hearts and minds of the Han majority. As he starts his open letter Zhang calls Kang a self-interested babbler whose views, more harmful in influence than those expressed by worthless scholars and evil ringleaders, have to be corrected.<sup>29</sup> After setting the tone of his letter with an ad hominem attack, he goes on to counter some of the arguments in Kang's letter, again focusing his attention more on mocking Kang's moral character or stretching Kang's arguments ad absurdum than on debating the soundness, credibility and relevance of the arguments. He first challenges Kang's view on ethnicity, asserting that the ethnic fluidity in Chinese history noted by Kang has been a result of cultural assimilation of the minorities by the Han. Unlike the assimilated minorities in history, the Manchus, in his view, remain distinct from the Han in religion, clothing, and language. Even their posture as followers of Confucianism is nothing but a façade they are forced to maintain to fool the Han.<sup>30</sup> For their part, the Han should hate the Manchus to a man in response to the universal Manchu hostility toward the Han.<sup>31</sup> Seeing the relationship between the Han and the Manchus as characterized by irreconcilable antagonism, Zhang, like Zou Rong, rigidifies the boundaries between the two groups and completely rules out the possibility of peaceful coexistence.

Perceiving the Manchus to be unified in their oppression of the Han, Zhang refuses to differentiate individual Manchu rulers according to their political leanings, as Kang does in his letter by distinguishing Guangxu from Cixi and Ronglu. Consequently, instead of seeing Manchu rulers as political agents capable of making their personal choices, he emphasizes their shared ethnicity as the only factor that determines their despotic attitude toward the Han. Finally, this monolithic view of Manchu rulers gives rise to his denunciations of not only the conservatives among them but also Guangxu, the solution to China's problems in Kang's letter. Referring to the emperor by his personal name Zaitian rather than his reign title and, worse, insulting the emperor by calling

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29 Zhang Taiyan, "Bo Kang Youwei lun geming shu" (A Rebuttal to Kang Youwei's Letter on Revolution), in *Zhang Taiyan shi wen xuan zhu* (A Selection of Annotated Poems and Essays by Zhang Taiyan), ed. Zhang Taiyan zhuzuo bianzhu zu (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1976), vol. 1, 243-305, 245.

30 Zhang Taiyan, 250.

31 Zhang Taiyan, 256.

him a “clown incapable of telling beans from wheat,”<sup>32</sup> Zhang portrays Guangxu as a weakling unable to exercise the absolute power of an emperor, contrasting him with the autocratic first emperor of the Qin dynasty to highlight his total lack of willpower and political competence. Notably, this contrast shows that Zhang understands leadership largely as an exercise of power or even force, an exercise in which the strong end up gaining unquestionable authority while the weak are rooted out. Meanwhile, subjected to a subservient position and deprived of the opportunity to control their own fate in this exercise, the led are left with little freedom to negotiate with the leader to promote or even protect their own interests. In other words, despite his ostensible embrace of democracy, Zhang’s understanding of leadership as exercise of absolute power by the strong certainly does not provide a path to true democracy.

Proven to be an inept leader, Guangxu in Zhang’s view only makes constitutional monarchy more difficult to succeed than revolution, a program for which the question of leadership still remains open, making possible the emergence of leaders as great as the Chinese sage kings Yao and Shun, if not as great as Washington or Napoleon.<sup>33</sup> More optimistically, Zhang is convinced that revolutionary leaders will inevitably learn how to choose the right direction in the course of revolution, as shown in his following statement about the late Ming rebel leader Li Zicheng: “Suffering hunger and cold, Li Zicheng rose up in revolt. With no idea about revolution, he at first did not even measure up to members of today’s secret societies in Guangxi. However, as his army grew stronger the idea of revolution appeared. The appearance of the idea of revolution led to the efforts of resisting government troops, saving the people and providing famine relief and poverty relief. Was Li Zicheng born with these plans? As he fought for a long time, he came to know that these plans had to be carried out.”<sup>34</sup> Dictated by the historical circumstances in the modern world, the application of the doctrines of federalism and republicanism in a revolution in China will produce even better results than Li Zicheng’s strategies, since it will surely eliminate the possibility of dictatorship and lead to democracy.<sup>35</sup> Necessarily a progressive process in which the participants learn from the past and surpass their predecessors as they use strategies required by an advancing world, revolution in his view promises nothing but a bright future. Meanwhile, its destructiveness, exemplified in Kang’s view by rebels/tyrants like Li Zicheng, is not even mentioned.

As he remains certain of the forward-moving propensity inherent in revolution, Zhang rejects Kang’s view that lack of enlightenment among the Chinese makes revolution a dangerous proposition. Instead of perceiving the Chinese to be a nation prone to periodic outbursts of violence, as Kang tries to prove with the numerous rebellions in Chinese history, he sees the nation as a pool of positive potential waiting

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32 Zhang Taiyan, 267.

33 Zhang Taiyan, 284.

34 Zhang Taiyan, 287.

35 Zhang Taiyan, 287.

to be tapped through revolution. As a result, he dismisses Kang’s concern about the backwardness of the Chinese and responds to Kang’s warning about revolution with the following exclamation: “Human enlightenment comes in the wake of struggle. To enlighten people today we need to resort to nothing else but revolution.”<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, for all his conviction in the enlightening power of revolution, he cannot picture the final outcome of revolution except calling it a world of democracy, a vague abstraction that offers no specific guidance.

Burning with a desire to reshape the world quickly and disdainful of tangible obstacles in reality, Zhang’s notion of revolution represents a kind of Utopian thinking unassisted by imagistic imagination. Abstract as it is, it can be flexibly translated under different circumstances. Therefore it has an attraction for voluntarists, such as Mao Zedong, who tend to spurn detailed planning as too confining for the potential of human will. When he asked his colleagues to read Zhang’s letter at the Chengdu Conference Mao obviously tried to influence them with Zhang’s Utopian thinking. As he brought his colleagues to his side and as the Party’s propaganda machine intensified its efforts to promote the Great Leap Forward, a Utopian mood quickly came to dominate the whole country. To give just one example, I will turn to “Let Us Wage a War against the Earth,” a poem composed by the renowned poet Guo Moruo and published in the Party newspaper *People’s Daily* on April 8, 1958. In this poem, written to celebrate a Party decision made at the Chengdu Conference to send hundreds of thousands of demobilized People’s Liberation Army soldiers to work on state farms in different parts of China, Guo proclaims confidently:

We will reclaim land on a large scale,  
 Reaching Hainan Island in the south, the Heilongjiang River in the north  
 And the Pamirs, the roof of the world, in the west.  
 Ocean floors and mountaintops will be planted with crops.  
 The Gobi Desert will be transformed into fertile fields.  
 [.....]  
 Indeed, only in a dictionary for fools  
 Can one find the word “impossible.”<sup>37</sup>

What we see here, I would argue, is a logical development of Zhang’s Utopian thinking, carried to an extreme. Built on a belief in the omnipotence of human will and agency, Guo’s Utopian fantasy becomes definitely unreal as a result of his unscientific disregard of the constraints of nature. However, as Susan Schoenbohm points out, although what it presents is not real, Utopian thinking itself can produce an impact on reality, depending on what people do with it.<sup>38</sup> When people are encouraged and pressured to ignore the

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36 Zhang Taiyan, 286.

37 Guo Moruo, “Xiang diqiu kaizhan” (Let Us Wage a War against the Earth), *Renmin ribao* (People’s Daily), April 8, 1958: 8.

38 Susan M. Schoenbohm, “The Function and Questionable Purpose of Utopian Thought,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 91.1/2 (Spring/Summer 2008): 21-32, 27.

constraints of reality while making efforts to reach Utopian goals, as the Chinese were during the Great Leap Forward, the results can be disastrous. Unfortunately, Zhang Taiyan failed to anticipate the disastrous consequences of Utopian thinking in his battle against Kang Youwei, a mistake Mao Zedong later repeated in launching the Great Leap Forward under the inspiration of Zhang and Zou Rong.

**Biographical note**

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