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The Contents of Different Forms of Time
On Ancient and Modern Concepts of *Geming* (Revolution) in
China

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The Contents of Different Forms of Time On Ancient and Modern Concepts of Geming (Revolution) in China *

Sinkwan Cheng **

Conceptual hybridization can occur either through internal evolution, when new historical circumstances invest an existing concept with new semantics, giving rise to a commixture in it of both old and new meanings. It can also occur when a concept is used to translate a foreign idea, creating a composite of native and imported semantics. The new semantics a concept acquires when used to translate foreign ideas are usually more radically heterogeneous to the target culture than those it can engender through internal evolution. Conceptual hybridization effected by translation could thus be revolutionary, as was the case with the Chinese concept geming when used to translate the modern Western concept 'revolution'.

However, as is generally the case with conceptual change, the old semantics of geming did not immediately get displaced by the new. More often that not, old semantics linger on, because old institutions and old worldviews continue to hold sway over a people and their language for a period of time, till the old ways of thinking and historical circumstances have disappeared.

In the case of geming, an old worldview which prevented an immediate takeover of the concept's old semantics by the new was the traditional Chinese cyclical time in which geming was embedded and from which the concept derived its meaning in pre-modern China.

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The classical Chinese term geming was used by the Japanese and then readopted by the Chinese to translate the modern western concept 'revolution'. The modern concept was shunned by the Chinese until after 1898. Scholars have so far focused on the contents of traditional Chinese values to explain this initial cold reception. I, by contrast, argue that the cold reception was rooted in the conflicts between the old cyclical and new linear temporalities framing respectively classical and modern gemings, causing the shared sets of contents in the two gemings to be inflected differently by two temporal forms. Before the Chinese could embrace the modern western concept 'revolution', they needed to have first developed the modern western linear time consciousness.

My paper examines how the Chinese population's change of heart toward the modern concept of 'revolution' was intertwined with the Chinese assimilation of modern western linear time. I examine how China's embrace of the modern concept of 'revolution' was made possible by its adoption of linear temporality, evident from how the country's new positive stance toward modern geming roughly coincided with its newborn enthusiasm for progress.



Why did the Cultural Revolution begin with fierce struggles over history and historiography?¹ Why was changing the calendar so crucial for the French Revolution? No existing scholarship I know of seems to have noticed an underlying

¹ Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik observes: “the Cultural Revolution got started with an intense struggle against the ‘academic authorities’ in the field of history” (“Campaign to Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius (批林批孔) and the Problem of ‘Restoration’ in Chinese Marxist Historiography”, in *The Challenge of Linear Time: Nationhood and the Politics of History in East Asia*, ed. Viren Murthy and Axel Schneider [Leiden: Brill, 2013], 157). The attacks on historians and historiography began before the largescale sociopolitical turmoil in the Cultural Revolution. In November 1965, at the dawn of the Cultural Revolution, Wu Han, one of the most prominent historians in the development of modern historical scholarship in China during the 1930s-40s, was singled out to be criticized for a historical drama he wrote called *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*. *Jiegufengjin* (using the past to

similarity of the keen preoccupation with the structure of time and history in both revolutions—and this despite the fact that it was primarily through the French Revolution that the modern concept of *geming* 革命 was introduced to China. The re-structuring (re-forming) of time and history was not just at the center of political discourse in both young nations; it was deemed to be foundational to whether the new republic and ‘the Revolution’ itself were going to stand or fall. Not coincidentally, the intense struggles in both France and China to revolutionize the forms of time and history emerged more or less together with ‘the Terror’. In the former as in the latter, aspiration for liberation and Terror were born together.



Due to space limitations, this paper will focus on China. But it is with the mentality of a comparatist that I tackle the following question: why was the modern concept of *geming*—the Chinese translation of ‘revolution’—initially poorly received by the Chinese despite the similarities in the referents of the new term and its classical counterpart? Since the initial negative reception of the term did not originate from significant discrepancies in the *contents* of the two terms,¹ it is to the *forms* of time (cyclical versus linear) framing the two terms that I look for the answer.

satirize the present) *became a serious crime*. Before long, other scholars who dominated the study of the Chinese past were targeted, such as Jian Bozan, Hou Wailu, and the editors of *Lishi yanjiu* (歷史研究). Even before 1962, some well-known historians already came under fire, such as Lei Haizung, Xiang Da, Chen Yinke, Gu Jiegang, and Liang Souming. Rong Mengyuan the Marxist was also one of the victims. After 1962, the targets were not limited to non-Marxists such as Liu Jie and Feng Youlan, but were extended to some moderate or heterodox Marxists including Zhou Gucheng, Wu Han, Jian Bozan, and Li Pingxin. In historiography as it was in the social-political arenas, there was a similar war cry for protecting Chinese Communism against the return of reactionary elements seeking to pull history back to a pre-Revolutionary stage—be it Chinese feudalism or capitalism. See Wang Gungwu, “Juxtaposing Past and Present in China Today”, *The China Quarterly* 61 (1975), 1-24.

¹ Scholars I know of writing since the second half of the 20th century have primarily focused on the discontinuities. I, by contrast, wish to draw attention to the *continuities* which have been critically

The classical Chinese term *geming* was used by the Japanese and then read-opted by the Chinese to translate the Western concept ‘revolution’. Despite the differences between classical and modern *geming*, a number of similarities exist also, especially in the early days of the Chinese usage of the new term. The continuities between the premodern and early modern meanings of *geming* include:

1. ruling powers can be challenged and changed, and any existing regime is subject to being overthrown;
2. a regime’s existence is dependent on its legitimacy;
3. a regime’s survival is subject to Heaven’s Will and the support of its people;
4. a thorough eradication of the existing corruptions by overthrowing the regime responsible; and
5. the involvement of violence.

Despite the crossovers, *geming* in its modern sense was initially shunned in China, although it quickly gained popularity after the failure of the One Hundred Days’ Reform in 1898; with the onset of the May Fourth Movement in 1919, it caught on like wildfire. Scholars I am aware of have focused thus far on the *contents*¹ of traditional Chinese values as responsible for their initial cold reception of modern *geming*. I, by contrast, argue that the cold reception was rooted

overlooked. As my paper will argue, this negligence prevents them from noticing how the content differences in the two concepts are shaped by the divergences in the forms of time framing the two terms.

¹ Take, for instance, Song Jie 宋婕, “Chuantong yu xiandai: ‘Geming’ gainian zhi kaojiu ji qi jieshuo” 传统与现代: ‘革命’ 概念之考究及其界说, *Guangzhou chengshi zhiye xueyuan xuebao* 广州城市职业学院学报 3 (2009): 83-87; Zeng Yi 曾翼 (2017), “Jindai yilai Zhongguo ‘geming’ gainian de yanbian—yi guojia zhili xiandaihua wei zhongxin 近代以来中国 ‘革命’ 概念的演变—以国家治理现代化为中心, *Chengdou ligong daxue xuebao (Shehui kexue ban)* 成都理工大学学报 (社会科学版) 25.1 (2017): 12-16; Feng Tianyu 冯天瑜, “‘Geming’、‘gonghe’: qingmin zhiji zhengzhi zhongjian gainian de xingcheng” ‘革命’、‘共和’: 清民之际政治中坚概念的形成, *Wuhan daxue xuebao: renwen kexue ban* 武汉大学学报: 人文科学版 1 (2002):10; and Zhu Keyi 祝懿 and Jiang Yong 蒋勇, “20 shiji shehui zhengzhi guanjianci ‘geming’ de huwenyu kaolun” 20 世纪社会政治关键词 “革命” 的互文语考论, *Fujian shifandaxue xuebao (zhexue shehuikexue ban)* 福建师范大学学报 (哲学社会科学版) 2 (2010): 94-104. On p. 96, Zhu and Jiang note that, as per *Yijing*, revolution in the human political world follows the seasonal cycle. But they fail to go beyond that observation to identify a different *form* of time framing modern *geming* which clashed with the cyclical time

in the conflicts between the old cyclical and new linear temporalities framing respectively classical and modern *geming*, causing the shared sets of *contents* in the two *geming* to be inflected differently by two temporal *forms*. Thus, even though both the classical and the modern concepts of *geming* allowed challenging and overthrowing an existing oppressive regime (and tyrannicide was approved as early as Mencius), the Chinese nonetheless found *geming* in its modern form highly objectionable when it first entered public attention.

My paper examines how the Chinese population's change of heart toward modern *geming* in the early 20th century was intertwined with transformations in the cultural *forms* of time shaping those contents in the first place. As Kant observes, time and space are structures of the human mind shaping sense data into perceptions, on which basis human beings formulate ideas about the world. Even in cases where there appear to be discrepancies in the contents between pre-modern and modern *geming*, they often arise from the divergences in the temporal forms framing the two concepts. Take, for example, the claim that pre-modern *geming* was limited to dynastic changes whereas modern *geming* includes not only regime but also social changes. I might point out that the thorough transformations of both politics and society through modern *geming* are excluded by default by the cyclical form of time governing classical *geming*, because an absolute break with the past with no return is possible only within a linear temporal framework.

I draw attention to how China's embrace of modern *geming* was made possible by its adoption of linear temporality,¹ evident from how China's new posi-

sensibility of the general Chinese population, rendering the new concept unacceptable for the general public in the early 20th century. This oversight is shared by all China Studies scholars I have read.

¹ Scholars overwhelmingly agree that China's time concept was cyclical prior to the 20th century. In 2001, Luke S. K. Kwong posited instead that linear time predated the last century. See his "The Rise of the Linear Perspective on History and Time in Late Qing China c. 1860-1911", *Past and Present* 173 (2001): 157-90.

Kwong bases his assertion on the following arguments, and I will point out why I do not find them convincing:

A. Kwong points to some statesmen and scholars' periodization as proof of their use of linear time. Take, for instance, his reading of "Reform" (*Bianfa* 變法; 1879) by Xue Fucheng 薛福成, the Chinese diplomat:

"Xue surmised that Chinese history had begun about ten thousand years ago, followed by four

distinct periods. There was, first of all, the 'primitive world' (*honghuang zhi tianxia*), where human beings lived and behaved like wild beasts. Several thousand years later, ingenious leaders like Suiren Shi (the Fire User), Youchao Shi (the Shelter Builder) and Shennong Shi (the Godly Agriculturalist) had transformed the primeval habitat into a 'civilized world' (*wenming zhi tianxia*), in which complex institutions and economic skills regulated and sustained people's lives. This second period coincided with the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties that had lasted for two thousand years before the Qin state unified China and replaced the earlier 'feudal' system of plurality (*fengjian*) with 'administrative centralism' (*junxian*). The third period thus began, distinguished by imperial rule. Finally, another two thousand years and many dynasties later, the Qin structure of government crumbled under the Western impact. China was forced into a new 'world of Sino-foreign interactions' (*Zhongwai lianshu zhi tianxia*) and into the fourth and current period of its history" (Kwong, "The Rise", 173-74).

Pace Kwong, I wish to point out that periodization is not inherently tied to linear time. In fact, Xue Fucheng's periodization sounds very close to those in the West promulgating a circular view of world history which was gaining popularity around Xue's time: take, for instance, Nikolay Danilevsky, and later on Oswald Spengler and Arnold J. Toynbee, all of whom portray history as consisting of separate cycles of development and decline of local civilizations.

B. Kwong repeatedly brings up the expression "unprecedented" (173) used by the Chinese to refer to their humiliations by foreign powers. Kwong takes the country's experience of the "unprecedented" as indicative of the supersession of cyclical time by linear time in China.

I respectfully disagree for the following reasons:

B.1. The concept of unprecedentedness had existed long before China's challenge by the West—in dynasties whose cyclical concept of time is undisputed. The expression 'without precedence' (*kongqian* 空前) can be found in the *Xunhe Collection of Paintings* (*Xunhe huapu* 宣和畫譜) and "A Sketch of She Who Dressed Up as a Man to Join the Army" (Nanfu congjun, *Wenjian oulu* 男服從軍, 聞見偶錄) in the Song Dynasty.

B.2. The reason why the concept of 'unprecedentedness' could coexist harmoniously with cyclical time for centuries in China is quite simple—as simple as how *jiang* (將), the word indicating 'future', could exist in the classical Chinese language together with its cyclical time culture. 'The future' and 'the past', just like 'the beginning' and 'the end', could be experienced by an individual confined within his/her lifetime. But both the beginning and the end disappear in the habitual Chinese practice of inserting the individual into the overall recurring cosmic scheme of birth, death, rebirth, etc. Likewise, what looks like 'unprecedented' in the short run may lose its 'unprecedentedness' once it is put into a macro-temporal scheme. The same applies to spatial perceptions. The earth looks flat to those earthbound; its roundness becomes visible only from a macro perspective such as an aerial view.

B.3. Not only does linear time have no monopoly on 'unprecedentedness'; 'unprecedentedness' can disrupt linear and cyclical time alike. Take, for example, the holocaust, which scholars have repeatedly described as 'unprecedented' and unassimilable into linear time.

The holocaust in its unprecedentedness created a trauma. Likewise, the Chinese activists, intellectuals, and statesmen who described China's experience at that time as 'unprecedented' could also be responding to a trauma rather than the burgeoning of linear time.

tive stance toward modern *geming* roughly coincided with the country's new-born enthusiasm for progress and *wenming* (becoming civilized), in contrast to its traditional veneration for the old.

C. Above all, when discussing the Chinese people's receptions of the ancient and modern concepts of *geming*, what is at stake is the time concept of the general population rather than that of merely the educated elites. This is especially important since the subject being discussed is revolution, and modern revolution has always concerned the struggle for democracy, popular sovereignty, and the will of the people rather than that of the elites.

Even after some educated elites had grasped linear time, it did not mean that the Chinese people in general had assimilated it. This was why, as discussed *infra* in §3.2, Sun Yat-sen had to package his *geming* to the Chinese public as continuous with China's ancient cyclical version rather than a revolution in the modern linear sense.

Had the Chinese public already embraced linear time by this period, Sun would not have had to disguise his *geming* in traditional Chinese cyclical language.

As it was, the traditional Chinese calendar—which is a calendar of nature (cyclical) rather than of history (linear)—remained strong even after Sun Yat-sen's move on 2 January 1912 to adopt the western solar calendar for all of China in his capacity as provisional president of the Chinese Republic. Cyclical time continued to prevail among the Chinese population for years to come, as Kwong himself points out:

“The result [of Sun Yat-sen's move to adopt the solar calendar for China] fell far short of the projected goal. The lunar calendar with its sixty repeatable units of combined ‘heavenly stems’ and ‘earthly branches’ remained conspicuously in use. Celebration of lunar calendar festivities went on unabated. Many continued to consult the *Book of Changes* as a guide for action or inaction. Days were still recognized as propitious or otherwise for ordinary activities such as travel, moving and building; special occasions like marriage related rituals and ceremonies required even closer attention. So pervasive were these practices that the many campaigns in the People's Republic after 1949 to purge the socialist system of ‘feudal’ superstitions reported only qualified success. In the 1950s, Wu Xiangxiang, a noted scholar of modern Chinese history, published a series of essays in Taiwan, using the stembranch names of the lunar years as a springboard back to the late Qing events that occurred sixty years before. No Chinese reader would have mistaken his intent for a historiographical statement; it was such a commonplace.

Liang Qichao's partial retreat in 1923 from his 1902 conviction thus illustrates a widespread cultural ambivalence, or better still, cultural ambidexterity, in late Qing China and beyond. The current annual edition of the Chinese almanac (*lishu* or *tongsheng*) tells the tale. Still printed and bound in the traditional style, it contains standard reference materials like the lunar calendar, divination instructions, the Chinese zodiac and the collection of twenty-four exemplary stories of filial piety” (188).



1. Geming in Classical Chinese—Cyclical and Periodic

The term *geming* consists of two characters. *Ge* refers to change or removal.¹ *Ming* designates heavenly order or command; it can also mean destiny or life. According to Xu Shen 許慎, the archaic form of *ge* 革 is composed of *gang* 甘 on top and *shi* 十 at the bottom, meaning “three decades make up one generation 世 at which point the *dao* changes 三十年為一世而道更也”).² *Ge* thus signifies *changes bound to take place periodically*. *Geming* denotes a certain orderly motion articulated as the periodic changes of the cosmos. This comes quite close to the original astronomical meaning of ‘revolution’, designating mainly the revolving motion of celestial bodies, and occasionally the cycle of the four seasons (*OED*).

In classical Chinese thought, the human order is part of the cosmic order. Thus dynasties are also subject to the cosmic pattern of periodic renewals, as each dynasty eventually gives way to degenerations and decline—quite similar to what Aristotle observes about the cycle of governments in *Politics*. A primary example given by *Yijing* was the displacement of Xia’s tyrant Jie by Shang’s King Tang, whose dynasty in time dissipated to such a degree in the hands of the tyrant Zhou that Shang’s last King was overthrown by Ji Fa who went on to found the Zhou Dynasty. In its origin in *Tuanchuan* 彖傳, *Gegua* 革卦 of *Yijing* 周易, *ge* and *ming* combined mean abiding by Heaven’s will to change:

¹ According to Xu Shen: “Leather (*ge*) is produced from removing hair from animal skin” (獸皮治去毛曰革). *Ge* thus carries the meaning of transformation. See Xu Shen 許慎, *Zhuyinban Shuowenjiezi* 注音版說文解字 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2015), 55. Chen Jianhua even reads separation, drastic changes, and death into *ge* as per Xu’s definition. See his “Geming”, 5. *Ge*’s association with drastic changes can be readily seen in many expressions with *ge* (革) as a component, such as ‘革心’, ‘革制’, ‘革面’, ‘革弊’, ‘革凡成聖’, etc.

² Xu Shen, *Shuowenjiezi*, 55.

“Heaven and Earth change (*ge*) and thus the four seasons. Tang and Wu’s *geming* followed the will of Heaven and the people 天地革而四時成; 湯武革命, 順乎天而應乎人”.³ Pre-modern China believed that changes originated from the will of Heaven. Emperors ruled by the Mandate of Heaven and they would be replaced by virtuous rulers should they turn despotic. The supplanting of one dynasty by another—also known as the displacement of the surname of one royal family by another—is referred to as *geming*.

One significant point in *Yijing* has been vastly overlooked by contemporary scholarship on ancient *geming*: scholars after the 1990s have kept focusing on the *contents* of the term while neglecting how its overarching cosmic framework—the *cyclical form* of time—impacts its contents. Thus when commenting on *geming* in *Yijing*, they keep hammering on ‘dynastic changes’. Most scholars add that it also carries the meaning of seasonal changes; however, the real significance of that cyclical form and how it renders classical *geming* categorically different from its modern counterpart have been left unexplored.



The ‘secular’ orientation of contemporary scholars is likely the reason for their hasty focus on the human political contents of *geming*, overlooking the predominant role of the overarching cosmology—that is, the *cyclical* operations of Heaven and Earth framing and determining human affairs. *Yijing* is a book dedicated to changes (*yi* 易). It is about *changes articulated in the order of cosmic, cyclical, moral renewals, after which dynastic renewals are modeled*. The fact that human forces are deemed a subset of cosmic forces (which includes the cyclical temporality) is evident from how, as demonstrated in the quote from *Yijing*, the changes of “Heaven and Earth and the four seasons” in *Yijing* take precedence over changes in the human political order. And emphases are placed on how

³ All translations are mine.

the latter follows from the former like Tang and Wu's *geming* followed the will of Heaven.

The periodic, cyclical meaning of ancient *geming* is given further explanations by the Tang Confucian scholar Kong Yingda 孔穎達's annotations in *The True Meaning of Zhouyi* (*Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義):

The Daos of Heaven and Earth, Yinyang and ascent-descent, warm-hot-cool-cold—things in the universe follow a constant pattern of changes (*biange*), from whence emerged the order of the four seasons. (. . .) Xia Jie and Yin Zhou were tyrannical and cruel without reins, thus incurring Heaven's wrath and people's rebellion. Yin Tang and Zhou Wu were smart and wise. They acted in harmony with the will of Heaven and the people. The defeat of Jia at Mingtiao and the killing of Zhou at Muyie removed (*ge*) their Heavenly Mandates and eradicated their abysmal governance. Hence the saying: "Tang and Wu's *gemings* followed the will of Heaven and the people". 天地之道，陰陽升降，溫暑涼寒，迭相變革，然後四時之序皆有成也。[. . .] 夏桀、殷紂，凶狂無度，天既震怒，人亦叛主；殷湯、周武，聰明睿智，上順天命，下應人心，放桀鳴條，誅紂牧野，革其王命，改其惡俗，故曰「湯武革命，順乎天而應乎人。」¹

Note how *geming* is being explained via the *cycle* of the four seasons. The cyclical nature of *geming* is also evident from its direct associations with the calendar. According to "Shiwei" 詩緯: "The time of *mou-you* is *gezhen*, that of *wu-hai* is *geming*" 卯酉之際為革正，午亥之際為革命. As per "Yiwei" 易緯: "Xin-you is *geming*; jia-zi is *geling*" 辛酉為革命，甲子為革令。

2. A Brief Reception History of *Geming* as a Modern Concept

2.1. The Term *Geming* before the One Hundred Days' Reform (1898)

Prior to the Reform of 1898 戊戌變法, *geming* was rarely used, its referent primarily inherited from *Yijing*.

¹ *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義, annot. Wang Bi 王弼 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, 9 *juan*, in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經註疏, ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元, 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), v. 2, j. 5. .

The entry of the term into public attention in China close to the beginning of the 20th century was a product of the Chinese readoption of this translation from Japan (革命; 力くめい; *kakumei*). During the Meiji Restoration, Japan used the classical Chinese term *geming*—which it had already borrowed in the 8th century—to translate the modern western concept ‘revolution’.

However, even as the term *geming* began to be used in the modern sense, the connotations were initially negative or neutral at best.²

2.2. China’s Initial Negative Attitude toward Geming

According to the study of Jin and Liu, *geming* was rarely used prior to 1899.¹ In 1898, the term appeared only 36 times in their *Database for the Study of Modern Chinese Thought and Literature (1830-1890)*.² *Geming* as a modern term in its initial appearance was primarily used to discuss the revolutions in France, Europe, and countries outside China.³ The only exception was Wuyasheng 無涯生’s “A Briefing on *Gemings* in Chinese History” (Zhongguo lidai geming shuolue 中國歷代革命說略). During this period of time, the term *geming* carried disparaging connotations. Rioters, mutinists, and seditionists were all called ‘*geming* gangs’ 革命黨.

Take, for instance, Huang Zunxian 黃遵憲’s *A History of Japan* (Riben guozhi 日本國志 in 1887, where *geming* was used negatively to describe a rioter as a “murderer” 凶徒 attempting to assassinate a government official. According

² Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng 金觀濤、劉青峰, *Guannianshi yanjiu: Zhongguo xiandai zhongyao zhengzhi shuyi xingcheng* 觀念史研究: 中國現代重要政治術語的形成 (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2008), 558.

¹ Prior to the 1890s, the missionaries often used the derogatory term ‘rebellion’ (*zhaofan* 造反) to translate ‘revolution’ which they primarily associated with the French Revolution.

² *The Database for the Study of Modern Chinese Thought (1830-1930)* was built by Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng when they were Senior Research Fellows at the Institute of Chinese Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong (1989-2008). Liu Qingfeng was the Editor-in-Chief of the project. The *Database* as it stands now consists of more than 100 million terms, with data collected from around 300 texts from 1830-1930 in China that reflect the social and political thought of the period. Texts consulted for data collection include newspaper and magazines, written and translated works of Chinese officials and foreign visitors, historical diplomatic records, as well as text books on western learning.

³ Jin and Liu, *Guannianshi yanjiu*, 363 and 365.

to Jin and Liu, this was the first publication using *geming* to refer to events outside China. Next came Wang Tao 王韜's famous 1890 *Revised Edition of a Brief History of France* (*Chongding faguo zhilüe* 重訂法國志略).⁴ Wang's book seems to be the first to adopt *geming* to refer to the French Revolution.⁵ The book shows substantial influences from the Japanese scholars Oka Senjin 岡千仞 and Okamoto Kansuke 岡本監輔—especially *A History of France* (*Furansushi* 法蘭西志)¹ edited by the former and *A Universal History* (萬國史記) authored by the latter.²

Wang was ambivalent toward the French Revolution. Those involved in the Revolution were called “thugs and mob” (baotu 暴徒, luanmin 亂民). Marat and Robespierre were “rioters and traitors” (luandang 亂黨, pandang 叛黨).³ The Revolution was portrayed as an abysmal Hell. Yet on the other hand, Wang's account of the ruling elites was also nothing less than damning, and he was sympathetic toward their subjects whose misery and anger finally exploded as the Revolution. He also lavished praise on the patriotism of the French people who courageously defended their republic during the Revolutionary Wars.

Wang's book stimulated considerable public interest in the French Revolution, in the aftermath of which a number of writings appeared in China on this subject by reformists and radicals alike. For example, Kang Youwei's *A History of the French Revolution* (*Faguo geming ji* 法國革命記) in 1898,⁴ and Feng Ziyong 馮自由's translation of Tamotsu Shibue 澀江保's *Faguo ge ming zhan shi* 法國革命戰史 in 1900. More renditions entitled *Faguo ge ming zhan shi* were

⁴ The book, first written in 1871, went through a few revised editions, the most often quoted being the 1890 version.

⁵ See Chen Jianhua 陈建华, “Geming” de xiandaixing: Zhongguo geming huayu kaolun 革命的現代性：中國革命話語考論 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2000).

¹ Victor Duruy 猶里 (シユリー), *Furansushi* 法蘭西志, transl. Jirō Takahashi 高橋二郎, ed. Senjin Oka 岡千仞 (Tōkyō: Rogetsurō 露月樓, 1878).

² Okamoto Kansuke 岡本監輔, *Wanguo shiji* 萬國史記, 20 juan (Shanghai: Shenbaoguan, 1879).

³ Wang Tao's strong disapproval of the French Revolution is similar to that of Oka Rokumon and Okamoto Kansuke. The term *geming* is very sparingly deployed by Wang Tao, and is absent altogether from Okamoto Kansuke's text. The latter used “total mayhem” or “lawlessness” (da luan) 大亂 instead to describe the French Revolution.

⁴ This is one of the five volumes on world history written by Kang Youwei for Emperor Guangxu 光緒. The five volumes are: *Riben mingzhi bianzhengkao* 日本明治變政考 (December 1897), *Eluo Dabide bianzhengji* 俄羅大彼得變政記 (January 1898), *Tujue xueruoji* 突厥削弱記 (May 1898), *Faguo gemingji* 法國革命記 (June 1898), and *Bolan guafen mieguoji* 波蘭瓜分滅國記 (June 1898).

made by Zhao Tianji 趙天驥 and Zhongguo guomin congshushe 中國國民叢書社, appearing respectively with Guanzhi shuju 廣智書局 in January 1903, and Shangwu 商務印書館 in April 1903. In August, 1903, Shanghai's Mingquan-she 明權社 published *Falanxi gemingshi* 法蘭西革命史—a Chinese rendition of Takematsu Okuda 奧田竹松's *Furansu Kakumei shi* 仏蘭西革命史. The book was translated by Qingnianhui 青年會—a Chinese patriotic revolutionary student organization in Japan. Between May 1907 to February 1908, Jisheng 寄生 (Wang Dong 汪東)'s *Faguo gemingshilun* 法國革命史論 appeared in *Minbao* 民報.

2.3. The Chinese Acclimatizing to Geming: Modern Geming Increasingly Became Associated with Progress and a Myriad of Modern Political Virtues

The Chinese adopted from the Japanese the association of *geming* with the strife for democracy. This was how the sinologist Teikichi Kojo 古城貞吉 used the term in 1896 to describe revolutionaries in Europe. Take, for instance, “European Political Activists Demanding Democracy” (Ouzhou dangren changbian minzhu 歐洲黨人倡變民主) which Kojo translated from the Japanese newspaper *Kokuminhō* 國民報 for *Shiwubao* 時務報 in 1896.

Geming and the Struggle for Democracy: Liang Qichao and Jiang Zhiyou

Although not the first to revive the use of *geming* in modern China, Liang Qichao was the first person to popularize the modern usage of *geming*, according to Chen Jianhua.¹

After the failure of the 100 Days' Reform in 1898, Liang Qichao fled to Japan. Following the Japanese, he connected *kakumei* 革命 to democracy and people's rights in his translation of Shiba Shiro 柴四朗's *Encounters with Beautiful Women* (Kajin no Kigaku 佳人之奇遇 かじんのきぐう) (1898). A far more important contribution of Liang in disseminating the modern usage of *geming* was

¹ Chen Jianhua, “Geming”, 13.

his term “poetry revolution” 詩界革命 coined in December 1899 in his *Hawaii Travels* 夏威夷遊記. The term inspired many poems in *Qingyi Bao* 清議報 and *Xinmin Congbao* 新民叢報 celebrating freedom and democracy while attacking the Manchus. Especially worth noting is Jiang Zhiyou 蔣智由’s widely circulated poem “Rousseau” (Lusao 盧騷) whose lavish praise of the French Revolution marked a turning point in modern Chinese political thought. A reformist, Jiang had come a long way from Kang Youwei and Wang Tao’s rigorous dismissal of *geming*. 1903 was generally taken to be the year when China’s modern revolutionary consciousness came of age. Qian Jibo 錢基博 recounts how in that year, Liang Qichao founded the *Qingyi Bao* and *Xinmin Congbao*, periodicals advocating *geming*. In the same year, Zou Rong’s “Geming Army” got published which produced a huge surge in the popularity of the term *geming*.¹ Sun Yat-sen’s “An Overview of the Revolutionary Movement” (*Geming yundong gaiyao* 革命運動概要) observes: “Zou Rong’s ‘Geming Army’ and Zhang Taiyan’s ‘A Rejoinder to Kang Youwei’ were widely read and discussed. Countless publications, abroad and inside the nation, were devoted to advocating *geming*. Both the people’s hearts and morale wanted change” 鄒容之《革命軍》、章太炎之《駁康有為書》尤一時傳誦。同時國內外出版物為革命之鼓吹者，指不勝屈，人心士氣，於以丕變。鄒容之《革命軍》、章太炎之《駁康有為書》尤一時傳誦。同時國內外出版物為革命之鼓吹者，指不勝屈，人心士氣，於以丕變。鄒容之《革命軍》、章太炎之《駁康有為書》尤一時傳誦。同時國內外出版物為革命之鼓吹者，指不勝屈，人心士氣，於以丕變。²

After the May Fourth Movement of 1919, *geming* became closely associated with progress and legitimacy, and even extolled by some as the highest political virtue.³ Two years later, the Chinese Communist Party was founded, and the use of the term drastically increased. At its peak in 1926, the term appeared more than 4,200 times. The term “class *geming*” 階級革命 was born in this period.

¹ Jin and Liu, *Guannianshi*, 336.

² Sun Wen 孫文 [Sun Yat-Sen 孫逸仙 is the commonly used name in English], “Zhongguo gemingshi” 中國革命史, in *Geming zhi changdao yu fazhan I* 革命之倡導與發展 (一), vol. 9 of *Geming yuanliu yu geming yundong* 革命源流與革命運動, Ser. 1, of *Zhonghuaminguo kaiguo wushinian wenxian* 中華民國開國五十年文獻 (Taipei: Zhongyang wenwu gongyingshe, [1923] 1964), 195-96.

³ See Jin and Liu, *Guannianshi*, 357.

3. How Forms of Time Influenced the Chinese's Stance toward Geming

3.1. Negative and Positive Evaluations of the French Revolution were Both Inflected by Cyclical Temporality: Wang Tao

Shan Suyu 單素玉 and Chen Jianhua regard Wang Tao's simultaneous condemnation and sympathy for the French Revolution to be a 'self-contradiction'. I, by contrast, trace Wang's ambivalence to a *contradiction between content and form*—between Wang's instinctive reaction to what happened, and the cyclical time of the Chinese culture that predisposed the author to register certain problems more readily than others.

Wang Tao's criticism of the 'rioters' in the French Revolution is powered by cyclical temporality; his sympathy for them likewise. His analysis of the cause of the Revolution strikingly hinged on the same cyclical yinyang language characterizing *Yijing*: "The powerful for generations ruled despotically and stifled people's rights. *Things pushed to the extreme would strike back in turn*.¹ *The Dao of Heaven works in cycles and every being reaps what it has sown*. Thus, the ruled wanted to get back at the ruling, their gang members multiplied, and riots became unstoppable". 蓋先世諸王貴族，擅作威福，抑制民權。物極必反，天道循環，轉以釀民人凌上之風，黨羽日繁，亂益不息。² The famous saying "*Things pushed to the extreme would strike back in turn*" could be found in the Daoist classics "Circular Flow" (Huanliu 環流) of *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子 and "*Taizu Xun*" 泰族訓 of *Huainanzi* 淮南子。

Despite his sympathy toward the oppressed, the logic and the language of cyclical time also made Wang condemn the rioters' actions as unacceptable. The cyclical temporality which led him to view the downfall of the French ruling elites as "heavenly justice" also prompted him to take the same stance toward the rebels: "The French murdered their king and those traitors in no time met their ends. The Dao of Heaven likes to return what one sews, whose principle

¹ "物極必反" can also mean "Anything pushed to its extreme turns into its opposite".

² Wang Tao 王韜, "Preface" to *Faguo tushuo* 法国图说原叙 (法国图说 was the original title of 法国志略), in *Wang Tao zhuan* 王韜传, ed. Hai Qing 海青 (Beijing: 中国人民大学出版社, 2013 [1871]), 58; my italics.

is applicable to examining changes in human affairs”. 法人弑王而叛黨旋覆，英人弑王而高門士亦隨滅，不獨天道好還，而亦可觀世變。³

In short, the central principle via which Wang Tao understood the French Revolution was the ancient *Yijing* wisdom: *the Dao operates cyclically in which every being takes its turn*. Although France was the superpower in Europe, “change means decline will begin after the height of prosperity. The sun after reaching high noon will move west; the moon at its fullest will start to wane. This is a universal constant” 盛極而衰，此其變也。日中則昃，月盈則隤，此理之常法。¹ For Wang, China was entering a similar phase of decline after prosperity. He wrote the book so that his compatriots could learn from France’s experience and avoid its mistakes. Cyclical time motivated Wang to write the book for China to draw a lesson from eighteenth-century France; it was also the interpretative framework via which Wang examined the French Revolution.

3.2. Modern Geming in its Initial Use by Revolutionaries Often Disguised as “Restoration” to Cater to the Chinese People’s Traditional Temporal Sensibility: Sun Yat-sen and His Comrades

Cyclical time entails that the future repeats the past. Authority is based on seniority: whoever has lived the longest has accumulated the most wisdom from the past, and whichever idea has withstood repeated tests over the longest period of time has proved its eternal validity.

China was initially resistant to modern *geming*, because their vision of society and politics was framed by cyclical temporality which based future expectations on past experience. This time concept produced a long tradition of Chinese valorization of restoration rather than destruction of the old, alongside a tendency to associate the radically new with disruption—namely, with some kind of disorder bound to be overridden by the ultimate cosmic order.

³ “Bopangshi ji” 波旁氏紀, *Chongding faguo zhilue* 重訂法國志略, 24 juans (n.p., 1890), j. 5, toward the very end of the last page of “Bopangshi ji” (no pagination), available online at <https://cada1.edu.cn/cx/reader/reader/book/reader.shtml?channel=1&code=dc1ead909aaac24e02bb4ec60c7721db&epage=-1&ipinside=0&netuser=0&spage=1&ssno=01036538&userid=1423944&bookType=2>.

¹ Wang Tao, “Preface”, *Faguo tushuo*, 58.

The radical destruction of the old associated with modern *geming* easily got experienced by the Chinese as an assault on traditional values animated by cyclical temporality—including the latter’s veneration of past wisdom as the foundation for future directions, and its favoring of preservation over innovation.

For this reason, Sun Yat-sen and his comrades had to rephrase their *revolution* as *restoration* in order to garner public support. In Sun’s political rallies, the rhetoric of restoration was ubiquitous. *Had the Chinese public already embraced linear time by this period, he would not have had to disguise his geming this way.* His speeches were filled with expressions such as “returning to the China that once was” and “recouping the lost lands”. He even named the first revolutionary organization he founded in 1894 Revive China Society 興中會, with the overtone of returning China to its former glory. Initially, the mission of the Society was to overthrow Manchu rule and restore a Han government, as is evident from the oath of the organization, which reads: “Expel the barbarians, restore China, and establish a united government” 驅除韃虜、恢復中華、創立合眾政府 (my italics).

Sun frequently invoked the ancient classics and sages to justify his cause, stressing the continuities between his *geming* and those of Tang and Wu. Significantly, he appealed to the authority of *Yijing* based on its being “the oldest” book in China, and to the *gemings* of Tang and Wu on account of their undisputed legacy after more than twenty dynasties. Thus he urged, “The magnificent *Yijing* is the *oldest* book in China. Both Confucius and ‘Sici’ from *Yijing* advised that the *gemings* of Tang and Wu abided by the Will of Heaven. Moreover, the examples of Tang and Wu have been passed down for *more than twenty dynasties*”.¹

The fact that cyclical time was deeply rooted in Chinese culture, combined with Sun’s promotion of his revolution as ‘restoration’, resulted in the general non-recognition of the 1911 *Geming* as a revolution when it succeeded in overthrowing the Qing Dynasty. Rather, it was referred to by the newspapers as the ‘Wuchang Uprising’. During this year, the term *geming* appeared somewhat more than 200 times—half as many as the term ‘constitutionalism’ 立憲 which appeared more

¹ Sun Zhongshan 孙中山, *Sun Zhongshan Quanji* 孙中山全集, 11 juan (Beijing 中华书局, 1981), j. 1, 234; my italics.

than 400 times.² Nor did the term *geming* appear often until 1919. *Only after the May Fourth Movement's passionate embrace of linear time* did the Nationalist Government in the 1920s champion the use of 'Xinhai *Geming*' to signal its having legitimately overthrown a backward and impotent regime, establishing instead a Republic in line with modern world civilization. In Jin and Liu's words: "Calling the overthrowing of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 a *geming* was the result of history being reinterpreted by a new moral consciousness".³

3.3. Cyclical Time and the Preference for Reform over Revolution, and How it Gave Way under Serious National Crises

The yinyang circle operates like a moebius strip which unfolds into its opposite at its 'extreme limit'.¹ In other words, *opposites in this circular structure are continuous with, rather than divided from, each other.*

For this reason, reform rather than the modern sense of revolution would appeal more readily to the Chinese who grew up with a cyclical temporality. The two sides of yinyang are always in the process of *evolving* into their opposites. By contrast, revolution in the modern sense inaugurates an absolute break between the 'before' and the 'after'. By the early twentieth century, however, things sometimes went so bad in China that people were shocked into wanting a 'decisive break' with no return—the kind of break possible only within linear time. The May Fourth Movement provides a good example of the eruption of linear time in China.

Prior to the Coup of 1898 (Wuxu Coup), reform was obviously far more preferred than *geming*, evident in how *geming* appeared only 36 times in that year according to Jin and Liu's *Database*. The number fell far behind a few other terms designating political reform: such as *bianfa* 變法 which appeared over 1,000 times, *weixin* 維新 approximately 500 times, and *gaige* 改革 about 180 times. The strong preference for reform was evident not only from the Wuxu

² Jin and Liu, *Guannianshi*, 376.

³ Jin and Liu, *Guannianshi*, 357.

¹ I use the term 'limit' in the Hegelian sense of a reflection-into-itself of the boundary.

Reform but also from the Self-Strengthening Movement (1861-1895).² Even in 1911 when the Revolution broke out, the term *geming* only appeared somewhat more than 200 times (and primarily used to refer to *geming* organizations 革命黨), in contrast to more than 400 appearances of the term ‘constitutionalism’ 立憲.³

After the defeat of the Wuxu Reform in 1898 and China’s humiliation at the Eight-Nation Alliance in 1900, people completely gave up on reform and fervently desired an absolute break with the past. While *geming* appeared only 36 times in 1898, usage of the term dramatically increased to 140 times in 1899, and to more than 200 times in 1901.¹ It was amid this fervor for an absolute break with the backward Qing Dynasty that Zou Rong’s *Geming Army* appeared in 1903—a widely read book which contributed to the tremendous popularity of *geming*, bringing about the first peak of its usage in 1903, when the term appeared about 1,400 times. The preface to *Geming Army* was authored by Zhang Taiyan. In June of the same year, Zhang pushed forward revolution against reform with his “Rejoinder to Kang Youwei on *Geming*” 駁康有為論革命書.² ‘*Geming* army’ and ‘political *geming*’ became the most passionately embraced expressions by radical journals and periodicals such as *Zhejiang chao* 浙江潮, *Jiangsu* 江蘇, and *Hubei xueshengjie* 湖北學生界. In 1903, there were more than 200 mentions of the French Revolution which by then had become greatly admired and fervently championed rather than condemned.

In 1906, the usage of *geming* reached an even higher peak (more than 2800 times). In November 1905, the monthly periodical *Min Bao* 民報—founded by the *Zhongguo Tongmenghui* 中國同盟會 to advocate *geming*—debuted in Tokyo, with Zhang Taiyan as its Chief Editor. In vol. 1 of this periodical, Shihuang 思黃 made a strong argument for the legitimacy and the absolute necessity of *geming*: “There is by now iron proof of the impotence of the current government (. . .) Never has there been a dynasty in China which was able to clear up all the rottenness it has accumulated. For this reason, a new regime always

² The principle of the latter, first proposed by Feng Guifen 馮桂芬 in 1861, was most famously summed up by Zhang Zhidong 張之洞’s formula in as late as 1898 as “Chinese learning as the guiding principle; Western learning for practical utility” (中學為體，西學為用).

³ Jin and Liu, *Guannianshi*, 376.

¹ Jin and Liu, *Guannianshi*, 373-74.

² Jin and Liu, *Guannianshi*, 374-5.

sprang up to replace the old. With that replacement, the accumulated putrefaction was purged. (...) To expect that reform could be possible without *geming* is like daydreaming that black hair becomes white and horns grow on a horse's head—sheer fantasy!”³



3.4. Linear Time: From Evolution to Geming

Evolutionism, China's Struggle for Survival, and Linear time

Yan Fu translated Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* 天演論 in 1897. In 1900, the Eight-Nation Alliance invaded Beijing, put down the Boxer Uprising (1899-1901), and imposed reparations in excess of the government's annual tax revenue. The Darwinian theory of 'survival of the fittest' spread like wildfire among intellectuals, statesmen, and activists. It struck home that China would risk being completely destroyed if the country did not change and progress drastically to catch up with the world. Unlike the old Chinese cyclical temporality according to which death will necessarily be followed by birth, evolutionism shows that mortality threatens not only individuals, but that species can become extinct should they fail in competition with other species. The Chinese easily concluded from this that an entire people could disappear should they fail to progress and meet the challenges from the world.

Being wiped out without return is based on the linear narrative of social Darwinism. Survival of the fittest emerges out of a temporal framework that is unambiguously linear. As my argument goes, *modern geming could enter the Chinese national consciousness only when linear temporality found a footing in the*

³ Chen Tianhua [Shihuang 思黃, pseud.], "Lun zhongguo yi gaichuang minzhu zhengti" 論中國宜改創民主政體, *Minbao* 民報 1 (November 26, 1905): 48-9.

Chinese social imaginary—which it did after the Eight-Nation Alliance Invasion, as can be detected from the increasing proliferation of linear-time based terms such as ‘evolution’, ‘civilization’, and ‘progress’. A decade later, the iconic revolutionary May Fourth Movement strongly championed progress, modernity, the thorough destruction of the past, and *wenming*.

Evolutionism a Necessary Pre-requisite for Revolution in the Particular Case of China¹

Evolutionism reoriented the Chinese toward linear time without which *geming* in the modern sense could not have been conceivable. It provided the first stepping stone—that is, linear time—for inducting the Chinese to *geming*.

A quick look at the writings of some of the most important popularizers of the modern concept *geming* would reveal how evolution provided important backing for *geming*:¹

Liang Qichao’s “Explaining *Ge*”, for example, declared that “*geming* is inescapable according to the universal law of evolution” 革命者，天演界中不可逃避之公例也。In this declaration, *evolution dethroned the cycles of Heaven and Earth as the universal law*, marking a significant break from the *Yijing* legacy by dissociating changes from the *cycles* of nature, explaining them instead via the *linear* temporality of natural selection.

Zou Rong, another important popularizer of the modern use of *geming*, also frequently tied *geming* to evolution. In his revolutionary pamphlet, he called for a break with the past, especially the recent past of the Manchu rule. He wrote: “Sweep away millennia of despotism in all its forms, throw out millennia of slavishness, annihilate the five million and more of the furry and horned Manchu race, cleanse ourselves of 260 years of harsh and unremitting pain (. . .) 掃除數千年種種之專制政體，脫去數千年種種之奴隸性質，誅絕五百

¹ China was a ‘particular case’ because evolution is usually incompatible with revolution, for the reasons why Marx faulted the Enlightenment liberals’ idea of progress as shallow and superficial.

¹ Not all evolutionists were keen on revolution. Yan Fu, who threw Chinese intellectuals and activists under the spell of social Darwinism with his translation of Huxley’s “Evolution and Ethics” in 1897, is a prominent example. Yan met Sun Yat-sen in 1905 and expressed how education and reform rather than *geming* would be the way to save China.

萬有奇之滿洲種，洗盡二百六十年殘慘虐酷之大恥辱”。² In *The Geming Army*, he called *geming* “the omnipresent law of evolution, the universal reason of humanity, and the key to the struggle for survival in a transitional period. *Geming* means following the will of Heaven and the people. 革命者，天演之公倒也；革命者，世界之公理也；革命者，爭存爭亡過渡時代之要義也”。³

By associating evolutionism with ‘universal law’ and ‘universal reason’, evolutionism crossed over from biology and social science to teleology. International struggles for survival became dignified as a metaphysical principle. Chen Jianhua highlights a similar crossover in Liang Qichao: when Liang read the French Revolution as human progress in line with the law of the evolution of human societies, ‘revolution’ acquired a Hegelian historical necessity.¹ In this crossover, *might was rewritten as right, so that violence called for by geming could acquire legitimacy*: it was through violence that the old and the regressive could be destroyed, so that humanity could advance toward its telos. Their arguments resonate with Kant and Hegel’s claim that human history has advanced through war, and with Marx’s argument that “The history of all hitherto existing human society is the history of class struggles”. The jungle book of the survival of the fittest became rewritten under teleology as the realization of Universal Reason. Universal Reason was how Zou defined *geming* as the *evolution* from barbarism to civilization despite *geming*’s close link to violence.

Important to note here is: *prior to Marxism, evolutionism through its appeal to ‘universal law’ and ‘universal reason’ was the first step in integrating Chinese history into world history, and geming was its instrument for achieving this. By linking the Chinese expression geming to ‘Universal Reason’, China entered the global historical march toward World Evolution/Revolution outlined respectively by Hegel and Marx.*

3.5. Linear Time: From Progress to Geming

² Zou Rong 鄒容, *Geming jun* 革命軍, in *Xinhai geming qianshinianjian shilun xuanji* 辛亥革命前十年間時論選集, ed. Zhang Nan 張柵 and Wang Renzhi 王忍之, j. 1b (Beijing: San Luan, 1960), 651.

³ Zou’s association of *geming* with evolutionism and the removal of blockages to progress was followed up by the anarchists after 1916.

¹ Chen, *Geming*, 16.

Closely related to the concept of ‘evolution’ and hence to modern *geming* was ‘progress’.

Since the French Revolution, ‘revolution’ in Europe became a critical motor of *progress* toward the telos of humanity, associated with the struggle for democracy, liberation, equality, and advancement toward the realization of universal justice and universal reason. China’s reception of the modern semantics of *geming* at the beginning of the 20th century also took place in the context of China’s aspirations for progress, and for a range of correlatives such as the western ideas of independence, freedom, equality, democracy, and the birth of the nation. All these concepts were associated with *modernity*, *progress*, and *unprecedented* new political ideals—in other words, with *linear temporality*.

Ever since the New Culture Movement (1915-26), *geming* was often used to denote the radical transformation of the nation to an advanced, progressive, and civilized state and society.

3.6. Linear Time: From Wenming to Geming, or, How the Semantic Changes of Geming Followed on the Heels of the Semantic Changes of Wenming

Another no less important ally of modern *geming* was *wenming*. In radical movements such as the May Fourth, they became almost synonymous.

Geming’s assumption of its modern semantics followed on the heels of the burgeoning of the modern use of *wenming*. The latter was also appropriated from classical Chinese to translate a key term from the West—that is, ‘civilization’.¹

Geming was defined by Zou Rong as “an advancement from barbarism to *wenming*”. Together with *wenming*, *geming* was passionately embraced by the

¹ The term ‘civilization’ emerged in mid-eighteenth-century French and very soon thereafter in English. It was quickly translated into many languages, including Italian, German, Swedish, Danish, Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Russian, and Serbian. Before long, the term was spread to other continents via European imperial expansion. ‘Civilization’, along with ‘progress’, ‘development’, and ‘emancipation’, were among the best known of concepts in 18th- to 19th-century Europe put into motion by a linear temporal framework toward the *telos* of human history.

May Fourth Movement which rejected the Chinese tradition wholesale in favor of a modernized, westernized, and ‘civilized’ China—the three adjectives being synonyms. One of the main tenets of this movement was an ‘orientation toward the future rather than the past’—that is, linear temporality. What the May Fourth demanded was no less than a revolution.

The desire to achieve *wenming* called forth the need for *geming*. The May Fourth Movement which began with its progenitor the New Culture Movement (1915-1921) became the midwife to a new *geming* party. Rising public anger against both the Chinese regime and the imperial powers prompted directly the formation of the Communist Party. Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀² and Li Dazhao 李大釗, leaders of the May Fourth, became primary founders of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921. Also active in the movement was the anarchist writer and agitator Ba Jin 巴金. Li Shicen 李石岑 and Zhu Qianzhi 朱謙之, originally voluntarist or nihilist figures, made similar turns to the left in the 1920s. Since the May Fourth Movement in 1911, *geming* together with *wenming* became the symbols of progress and radical change in the social and political order. In 1939, Mao Zedong declared that the May Fourth’s adoption of a new *wenming* was a critical step on the path toward the Communist Revolution:

The May Fourth Movement twenty years ago marked a new stage in China’s bourgeois-democratic revolution against imperialism and feudalism. The cultural reform movement which grew out of the May Fourth Movement was only one of the manifestations of this revolution. 二十年前的五四運動，表現中國反帝反封建的資產階級民主革命已經發展到了一個新階段。五四運動的成為文化革新運動，不過是中國反帝反封建的資產階級民主革命的一種表現形式。¹

3.7. Linear Time: Marxism and Geming

² Chen held that the French Revolution (and its concept of human rights) was one of the three major historical events that “most thoroughly transformed the old order and renewed society and the human spirit 最足以變古之道，而使人心社會劃然一新者”。See Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀, “Falanxi ren yu jinshi wenming” 法蘭西人與近世文明 [September 15, 1915], in *Duxiu wencun* 獨秀文存, vol. 1. (Shanghai: Yadong tushuguan, 1934), 11.

¹ Mao Zedong, “Wusi yundong”, 五四运动 (1 May 1939), *Mao Zedong Xuanji* 毛泽东选集 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe 人民出版社, 1951), j. 2, http://www.qstheory.cn/books/2019-07/31/c_1119478087_13.htm; my italics.

Geming found strong support in the linear temporality of Marxism, which is intensely committed to human beings realizing a utopic future—a telos built on “the historically inevitable transition from one system of production to another and the political change which ensues, leading to the eventual triumph of Communism” (*OED*).

The Marxist linear view of history provided strong support for legitimizing the communist rule in China. By 1949, a number of works devoted to the recent past had already existed.² From that time onward, the past became a foil setting off the brilliant progress made by the communists, a contrast highlighting how the communists had won and how they must continue. Contrasting life under the communists to people’s wretchedness before 1949 was highly encouraged by the government, and “every success was measured against the available facts and figures of the 1920s and 1930s”:

almost invariably, broad comparisons with the recent past led to conclusion that the People’s Republic obtained “achievements *unprecedented* in China’s history” and that most things had improved “at a rate unrivalled in past Chinese history”. [. . .] Indeed the achievements were astonishing. The new government was justifiably proud to highlight the dynamic present against the background of stagnant and corrupt past.¹

The ‘unprecedentedness’ of the communist accomplishments was accentuated by Marxism’s linear temporality. Not surprisingly, *geming* also rose to an unprecedentedly privileged status. The term became ubiquitous in Chinese social and political discourse.

However, despite the establishment of Marxism as the official ideology since 1949, the old cyclical form of time persisted—most unnervingly in historiography. Wang Gungwu and Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik demonstrated “strong

² Wang Gungwu gives a list of examples of writings devoted to this recent past: “Apart from the published Party documents, Mao Tse-tung’s *Selected Works* provided the correct interpretation of the main events between about 1919 and 1949. There was also Ch’en Po-ta’s *On the Ten-year Civil War*, first published in 1944 and revised after Liberation and Hu Hua’s widely used textbook, *The History of the New Democratic Revolution*. Additional material could be found in Hu Ch’iao-mu’s *Thirty Years of the Communist Party of China* and the *Short History of the Chinese Communist Party* produced by the editors of the Hsueh-magazine, both published in 1951. And then there were numerous reprints of Ch’en Po-ta’s three books on recent history: on Yuan Shih-k’ai, Chiang Kai-shek and on the “Four Families” who dominated the Kuomintang regime” (Wang, “Juxtaposing”, 3).

¹ Wang Gungwu, “Juxtaposing”, 3; my italics.

pull [of the past] on Chinese historians” which threatened to “overwhelm the present”.

I take Wang and Weigelin-Schwiedrzik one step further by tracing what they called ‘the strong pull of the past’ to the persistence of cyclical time in Chinese historical consciousness even after the Communist Revolution. The source of the strong pull has to be searched far beyond the Chinese scholarly practices and old habits discussed by Wang and Weigelin-Schwiedrzik. I argue that the persistence of *cyclical time was the real ‘reactionary force’ lurking in the New China threatening to pull history back to the pre-Revolutionary stage, and the real menace that drove Mao into ‘continuous revolution’*. Only by getting rid of this ancient cyclical temporality could the Revolution be protected from lapsing into another form of dynastic change.



4. Saving the Revolution: the Cyclical Mode of Historiography Must be Eradicated, and the Launch of the Cultural Revolution

Given that the communist geming is based on the linear temporality of progress, the return of cyclical time in historiography would mean undoing the Revolution which ought to be manifested in history as progress toward utopia rather than lapses into the past.

Besides, given that Marx’s world history advances in a linear manner, cyclical historical view would cut off Chinese history from world history, and would thus thwart China’s aspiration to act “as a key to and a model for the world’s future”.¹ A history based on cyclical time would also render the communist revolution merely another ‘dynasty change’ in the old sense of *geming*.

¹ Wang Gungwu, “Juxtaposing”, 3.

The stakes of being pulled back into the old cyclical historical mode were so high that the Cultural Revolution was launched in an attempt to completely eradicate these habits, and being ‘reactionary’ and ‘counter-revolutionary’ were declared heinous crimes punishable by death. Understanding how the Revolution could be completely neutralized and even destroyed by cyclical time sheds new light on Maoist China’s passionate hatred of capitalism. Capitalism was hated not so much for its *content*—after all, Marx did see capitalist development of productive forces as a critical step toward human liberation. Rather, the deepest threat consisted in how the restoration of capitalism would mean pulling history back in a direction opposite to that of the Revolution; *linear time would lapse back into cyclical time, and the Revolution would be destroyed*. This is the real significance of the ‘Down with Lin Biao and Confucius’ campaign 批林批孔. The attack on Lin Biao was joined to the attack on Confucius, because both were perceived as trying to turn the clock back—be it Lin’s attempt to revert from socialism to capitalism, or Confucius from feudalism back to slave society.

4.1. Modern Geming as a ‘Foreign’ Concept, and China’s Peculiar Fear of ‘the Strong Pull of the Past’

Linear temporality is not native to Chinese culture. For this reason, the ‘home-grown’ cyclical time returned from time to time to haunt the modern Chinese *geming* which tried to suppress it.

In the West, the break between the older cyclical and modern linear semantics of “revolution” was less ambiguous and certainly much less tortured. Western society did not feel compelled to purge cyclical time, for reasons delineated below.

Linear time was an internal development in the West and did not need to be artificially imposed or maintained

Unlike China where linear temporality was transplanted from the outside, in the West, linear time was given to modernity by Christianity. The differences

between Christianity and modernity were confined to the *content* level—with human beings displacing God as the agent of salvation. The *form* of time structuring the ways people exist—their hopes and remembrance, etc.—was not radically disrupted when the West entered modernity.

The West did not need to suppress cyclical time, and had far less complicated a history of ‘the return of the repressed’ to wrestle with

Cyclical time, one version of which was also native to the West, did not get condemned or suppressed in the modern West as it was by radical revolutionary movements in China. Rather, linear time and cyclical time coexisted in modernity. They merely parted ways to serve the increasingly differentiated spheres of modern life in the West. Linear time served *purposeful humanity* (including history and politics), while cyclical time, associated with *nature* which repeats itself *without purpose or end (telos)*, was consigned to the domain of *science*—science being a hallmark of *modern* western civilization. As such, cyclical time was not associated with ‘regression’ as it was by the Chinese radicals.

The Western Bifurcation between the Spheres of Linear and Cyclical Time

The bifurcation between the spheres of linear and cyclical time already took place in Christianity.¹ In the transition from Christianity to modernity, there was no change in the *formal structure*: the two kinds of time continue to be consigned to two different spheres. Changes took place only with regard to the new role of human beings as the subject agent of linear time. Under Christianity, only the time of God—or the time of redemption and the redeemed—is

¹ Note that from the New Culture Movement onwards, what the Chinese intellectuals and statesmen wished to learn from the West was natural and social sciences rather than Christianity. They were interested in ‘Mr. Science’ and ‘Mr. Democracy’, whereas religion had already been denounced in the West by many Enlightenment and positivist thinkers as superstition. The linear time adopted by China from the West was thus the secular time of rational linear progress. Apocalypse has no part in this rationalized temporality which champions creating paradise on earth through the progress of reason and science. I thank Fredric Jameson for reminding me to make this clarification.

linear. Unredeemed human beings, by contrast, are subjected to the cycles of nature, under which they are no different from animals that were born to die, and even Rome was doomed to pass away. “Vanity of vanities”, so preaches Ecclesiastes. ‘Revolution’ under those circumstances meant no more than human beings sharing the subjection of animals to the cycles of nature. As Cyril Tourneur put it in the mouth of D’Amville in *The Atheist’s Tragedy* I, i (new ed.: “Observ’st thou not the very selfe same course | Of *revolution both in Man and Beast?*” (my italics).

The division of linear and cyclical time into two different spheres continued in modernity. The only change was the agents of those temporalities. Human beings took the place of God in being the creator and master of linear time. Cyclical time was left to nature.

For the above reasons, even though the older astronomical meaning of ‘revolution’ was still strong at the beginning of the French Revolution and persisted through the end when the new meaning became dominant, the old meaning did not pose a threat to the French Revolution, and cyclical time did not have the counter-revolutionary ring it carried in China, nor did it interfere with the operation of linear time. The two times worked side by side from the onset of Christianity to the 18th century, partly because the western civilization was built on both Athens and Jerusalem, and partly because Christianity already included in its temporality (a reply to) the pagans’ cyclical time. In response to the charge that Christianity was to blame for the fall of Rome, Augustine argued in *The City of God* (413 C.E.) that Rome was not eternal but had been destined to fall as per the cyclical temporality of classical thought and what it had already said of all human empires and enterprises. Augustine argued that there are two cities—the City of God versus the City of Man. Matched onto this are two forms of time in Christianity—linear time which is the time of God and the time of redemption, versus human time which is doomed to cycles of ‘vanity of vanities’, because all things that come into being in the human world are destined to decay.¹

The West, having established itself on both the Greco-Roman and Judaic-

¹ Augustine’s counter-narrative to his pagan accusers was made on the basis of a *counter-temporality*, his challenge to the *content* of pagan thoughts built on the foundation of his challenge to the pagan *form* of time.

Christian civilizations, did not necessarily always adopt the Christian practice of moralizing and vilifying cyclical time. Rather, cyclical time was associated with the order of nature and was an object of *science* itself. Precisely during the age of Europe's Scientific Revolution—that is, the 17th and 18th century—the popularity of cyclical temporality was evident not only from the astronomical semantics of “revolution”, but also from its prevalence in European social thought. Despite the Enlightenment liberals' promotion of progress, human sciences in those two centuries from time to time theorized on the basis of nature's order and pattern—that is, cyclical recurrence. The economic and cultural upsurge of that period was viewed by many as a *renaissance of classical antiquity* after its medieval decline.

One good example of the cyclical thinkers from this period is Giambattista Vico, whose *Scienza Nuova* (1725) attempts to organize the humanities into a single science that records and explains the historical cycles of the rise and fall of human societies. For Vico, all nations and civilizations develop cyclically—with each cycle consisting of a divine, a heroic, and a human epoch. The recurring cycle of these three ages constitutes an ideal eternal history (*storia ideale eterna*). Thus, Vico argues, all history is the history of the rise and fall of civilizations.

Another good example is François Quesnay and the physiocrats whom he inspired, including Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, Baron de l'Aulne. Quesnay developed a theory of economic circuit,¹ the dynamics of which he compares to the flow of blood in the human body. He even created the first graphical representation of the economic process of production and distribution in his *Tableau économique* (1758-9). Quesnay's economic model laid the foundation

¹ I thank Giovanni Zanalda for reminding me of the pertinence of the physiocrats for my argument. This example prompts me to think of a *circular* flow of ideas between France and China. It began with the traditional Chinese advice to ‘follow nature and its cyclical rhythm’ and its influence on the physiocrats' economic view. This flow of ideas from the East to the West was subsequently answered by the impact of the French Revolution on both the 1911 and 1949 Revolutions in China. The *philosophes* provided a key connection in the circulation of ideas in both directions: in the French reception of pre-modern Chinese ideas, which they then combined with other ideas to launch their country into political and social modernity with the French Revolution—a revolution which was to completely transform China in the early 20th century.

of the physiocrats' ideas of economics,² and is now regarded as the original conceptualization of circular flow in an economy. Quesnay's *cyclical* idea of the flow of income and expenditure should not come as a surprise, given the leading physiocrats' enthusiasm for Chinese thought, and Quesnay himself was nicknamed 'the European Confucius'. His idea of the economic circuit emerged under *laissez-faire*, a term coined by Quesnay to translate the Daoist term *wuwei*³ in his writings on China.⁴ In fact, the name 'physiocracy' was most appropriately coined by Pierre Samuel Dupont de Nemours in 1767 to describe Quesnay and his group. The term literally translates to 'the rule of nature', and 'follow the *ordre de la nature*' is the central maxim of Daoism which gives rise to *wuwei* or *laissez-faire*. Nature operates in cycles, and the natural state of the economy is thus conceived to be a balanced circular flow of income and expenditure.

Even with the great triumph of linear time in the nineteenth century, cyclical time continued to have its place in the West, precisely because cyclical time being confined to the natural order could not pose a threat to linear time, and could even be harnessed by human creativity to serve the course of progress. Thomas Robert Malthus provided a good example of the bifurcation of the two forms of time and the subjugation of the order of nature (cyclical time) to the inventiveness of human beings (linear time).¹ Malthus counteracted the 'Malthusian population cycle'²—the exponential growth of population yielding famines and crises—with linear development manifested in the arithmetic increase of food production.

The Chinese Tradition Prescribed that the Human Order

² Henry William Spiegel, *The Growth of Economic Thought*, rev. ed. (Durham: Duke UP, 1983), 189.

³ J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (London: Routledge, 1997), 50.

⁴ Ina Baghdiantz-McCabe, *Orientalism in Early Modern France: Eurasian Trade Exoticism and the Ancien Regime* (Providence: Berg, 2008), 271-72.

¹ This subjugation structurally duplicated Christianity's subsumption of the time of both fallen human beings and nature (cyclical time) under the time of redemption (linear time).

² Examples of Malthusian population cycles with sharp upswings and then terrible crashes (such as famines and plagues) can be found in Europe from the 7th or 8th century to the 18th century. It can also be found in China with the dynastic cycles at least since the Han dynasty. I thank Herbert Kitschelt for these ideas.

Followed the Natural Order, Hence the Threat of the Old Tradition to the Revolution

The Chinese tradition did not bifurcate the time of nature and the time of humanity, and the radicals' attempts to impose linear time in historiography was an uphill battle that was finally abandoned after Mao's death. As late as the Cultural Revolution, China remained less modernized than Europe, and its spheres of nature and humanity continued to be far less differentiated. The Chinese radicals felt far more threatened than the modern West by the persistence of cyclical time in historiography, not the least because the Chinese economy being overwhelmingly agricultural in the Maoist era means that the one form of time presiding over both nature and humanity was cyclical. Cyclical time was the *existential lived time* of the people. In such a society, linear time could only be artificially imposed and had little chance to take root.

The difficulty of eradicating the Chinese habit of referencing ancient wisdom *despite* the Communist Revolution's supposed linear break with the past was further complicated by the fact that China's peasantry—whose existential lived time was cyclical—was assigned a vital role in Mao's communist revolution.¹

The differences between the social-historical contexts of China and the West which made the Chinese Revolution far more vulnerable to being undermined by cyclical time were further intensified by the fact that, in contrast to China's agricultural economy, Marx's idea of revolution targeted industrialized countries where, by the time he was writing, the limitations imposed on humanity by the natural cycle of day and night had already been overcome by electric light—an invention which could extend work hours past sunset, and at least theoretically made possible an infinite linear extension of 'daylight'.

While there are notions of an ideal state in traditional Chinese thought—take, for instance, the Confucian 'utopia' of 'The World as One' 大同—it is not a future telos to be realized via *geming*, nor is it an *ou-topos*. Rather, it references the Zhou order of the archaic past—an order elevated by Confucius into an ahistorical ideal.

¹ Mao himself admired and deployed extensively yinyang in his political and military strategies. Nonetheless, Chinese history had to be established exclusively as linear progress in order to present the Communist Revolution as a genuine modern *geming*, and the CCP as the only party bringing true progress and a real future to China.

The Non-Bifurcation of Nature and Humanity in Traditional Chinese Thought

The fact that the Chinese tradition made the human order part of the natural order is evident from the Chinese lunar calendar which tracks the cycles of nature rather than commemorates ‘great men’ and their deeds—the exact opposite of the practice of the French Revolution which pushed a linear history by inaugurating a calendar of history rather than of nature. *By making the natural order into a calendar, human activities, rituals, and habits in China were made to follow the rhythm of nature*—that is, the recurrent physical movements of celestial bodies, the rotation of day and night, and seasonal changes. As Kwong pointed out:

Many of the cosmic-cyclical elements were enshrined in the lunar calendar, attributed to the Xia dynasty (c.2200-1750 BC) and periodically adjusted to keep pace with the sun’s movements. The days and years each carry a ‘name’, in addition to a numeral designator determined either by the order of the days in the month cycle or, for the years prior to the Revolution of 1911, by an emperor’s reign. These ‘names’, sixty in all, are set by combining the ten ‘heavenly stems’ (*tiangan*) and twelve ‘earthly branches’ (*dizhi*) to form a cycle with as many units of ‘packaged time’, which will start over again after sixty days or sixty years.¹

The cycle of nature was revered as the Dao that organized every sphere of human life—history being no exception²—in contrast to the modern West where nature was made the *object* of human knowledge rather than revered as the Dao that structures humanity. The cycle of nature being the Dao itself, it became unimaginable for historiography to escape from cyclical time. Such an escape was rendered even more inconceivable by the fact that cyclical time was *the* Chinese cosmology that grounded *all* aspects of Chinese life for centuries. As such, it was next to impossible to extricate historical writing from other spheres

¹ Kwong, “Linear Perspective”, 164.

² The rise and fall of dynasties was read in terms of the cosmic rhythm—a worldview well captured by the reflections on human history and politics at the very beginning of the popular Ming novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義) by Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中: “The polity long divided is bound to come together as one, and that which has been together as one for too long will become divided”. See Luo Guanzhong, *Sanguo yanyi* (Beijing: Tongxin chubanshe, 1995), 4.

of Chinese life which were already penetrated through and through by the cyclical time of nature. Take, for example, the omnipresence in Chinese culture of Daoism, the five agents, Confucianism, the Buddhist ideas of karma, the periodic creation and destruction of the cosmos, and cyclical history. As Kwong put it, “The gamut of traditional thought, whether Confucian or non-Confucian, political or historical, religious or philosophical, elite or popular, yields abundant evidence that the cycle was central to the Chinese perception of the rhythm and dynamics of the universe, nature, life, time, history, politics, dynastic rule and human affairs in general”.³

³ Kwong, “Linear Perspective”, 165.

4.2. 'Deepening the Revolution': The Revolution Must Penetrate beyond the Contents of China's Old Social and Political Thoughts to the Form of Time Shaping those Contents

According to the Marxist linear temporal scheme, the Cultural Revolution was yet another attempt at 'deepening the Revolution' or 'pushing the Revolution one step further'. Marx pointed out how revolution cannot be merely political but also needs to be social. Revolution does not just "overthrow the old power" but also "dissolves the old society".¹ So long as the old social institutions persist, they are going to pull society back to the old ways despite the regime change. The 'political' and the 'social' are two aspects of one struggle. A revolution cannot be deemed to have been truly realized until the pre-existing norms have been transformed and replaced.

For the radicals in China, so long as the old cyclical historiographical mode remained, the Revolution would never be truly realized, and the minds of the people would continue to be enslaved by their old social and political institutions. The Revolution must therefore be carried out down to the level of culture and even people's cultural subconscious. Thus, to appropriate the words of Weigelin-Schewidrzik, "it was not by chance that the Cultural Revolution got started with an intense struggle against the 'academic authorities' in the field of history".² To thoroughly liberate China from the shackles of its old culture, the Revolution must penetrate beyond the *contents* of China's old social and political thoughts, and target its old *form* of time shaping those contents. To truly realize the Communist Revolution, the Chinese people's political *time consciousness must first be revolutionized*.

The struggles of China for liberation from the early twentieth century until the Cultural Revolution could thus be read from a Marxist linear temporal perspective as the historical progress of humanity toward utopia via a continuous trajectory of 'deepening the revolution'.

Even before the Communist era, early activists arguing for change already looked at *revolution as key to the country's 'evolution' into an advanced civi-*

¹ See Karl Marx, "Critical Notes on the Article 'The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian'" [*Vorwärts!* 63-64 (1844)], in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 205.

² Weigelin-Schewidrzik, "Campaign", 157.

lization. Both Liang Qichao and Zou Rong tied *geming* to ‘the universal law of evolution’. The strife for the *telos*—what I call in the Chinese case ‘the evolution of the Revolution’—required a continuous ‘deepening of the Revolution’. As Tze-ki Hon pointed out:

In much of the twentieth century, Zou Rong’s notion of *geming* dominated the political discourse in China. It informed many political movements that profoundly changed the country, such as the 1911 Revolution, the May Fourth New Culture Movement, the Communist Revolution, and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Distinct in their own right, these historical events were often linked together to project a historical teleology of ‘deepening the revolution’.

As the argument goes, 20th-century China began with a political revolution to transform the Chinese empire into a nation-state; then it underwent a cultural revolution to replace Confucianism with Western science and democracy; finally it required a socialist revolution to drastically revamp the socioeconomic structure of the country. The moral of the story is that modernity in China can only be achieved by severing the country’s ties with its past and completely transforming its political, social, and cultural systems. Embedded in the revolutionary teleology is the idea of linear progression where time must move forward until the *telos* of time is reached.¹

4.3. Linear Time: A Revolutionary History that Would Promote China ‘as a Key and a Model for the World’s Future...’

When the West used the term ‘the Chinese Revolution’ to refer to China’s *geming*, it already implied that the tumultuous transformations of China since the end of the 19th century were a part of world history and a product of what was ‘universally’ known as modernity. This was then dialectically turned by the young nation into a vision of “[its] present as a key to and a model for the world’s future, especially for all the colonial territories in the world”.²

¹ Tze-ki Hon, “Revolution as Restoration: Meanings of ‘National Essence’ and ‘National Learning’ in Guocui xuebao”, in *The Challenge of Linear Time: Nationhood and the Politics of History in East Asia*, ed. Viren Murthy and Axel Schneider (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 257-8.

² Wang Gungwu, “Juxtaposing”, 3.

In Mao's vision, it was not just that the (Communist) Revolution was a universal truth of which the Chinese Revolution was one manifestation, but that the trail blazed by China was becoming a universal truth and the country was leading the world to realize the universal Communist Revolution.

To make this vision possible, Chinese history must be joined to world history.

Linear time was critical for that purpose and for China's aspiration to become the locomotive of world history. Prior to Marxism, evolutionism was the first step integrating Chinese history into world history by aligning China's *form* of time with that of the world's. The integration then went deeper when evolutionism joined hands with revolution to demonstrate China's increasing involvement toward the telos of humanity via a series of revolutions.

Historiography being assigned the tasks of connecting the Chinese revolution to world revolution—and establishing the Chinese present “as a key to and a model for the world's future”¹—thus became the first battleground for the Cultural Revolution.

So long as China failed to align its historiography with the linear *form* of world history charted out by Marx, the Chinese Revolution could not serve either as a metonym or a synecdoche for the World Revolution.



5. Conclusion

Koselleck argued that social-political history intersects with semantic history.² My argument is motivated by an attempt to interphase both social-political

¹ Wang Gungwu, “Juxtaposing”, 3.

² See, for example, Reinhard Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, transl. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia UP), 75: “The association of *Begriffsgeschichte* to social history appears at first sight to be loose, or at least difficult. For a *Begriffsgeschichte* concerns itself (pri-

history and semantic history with temporality—that is, the temporal *form*—which informs both kinds of history.

This paper provides a history of the displacement of the concept *geming* from a cyclical temporal framework to a linear one—a formal change that allowed the concept to shed its traditional meaning of ‘*periodic* changes of dynasties’, and to act instead as the Chinese translation of the modern western idea of ‘revolution’. What was at stake in this new sense of ‘revolution’ for China was the country’s desperate fight for survival through a revolutionary remaking of its politics and society so that it could stand up to the imperial powers.

So long as time remained cyclical in Chinese society, the contents of *geming* would keep getting *de-formed* by the old temporality, and the Chinese habit of ‘using the past to address the present’ would keep returning to haunt the modern revolutionary historiography.

This is my response to Wang Gungwu’s discussion of the Marxist historians’ fear of the past overwhelming the present. Wang blamed the tendency on how “Chinese history had a tremendous pull and the power of analogy across the full length of Chinese history was immensely attractive to all knowledgeable Chinese”,¹ citing as examples the Chinese traditional habits of “using the past to criticize the present, using historical analogies for current political ends, praising or condemning contemporary figures by likening them to historical heroes and villains”.²

What Wang laid his fingers on was the epiphenomenal. My paper argues how the real cause of the Chinese habits of using the past to address the present was their cyclical concept of time. So long as the cyclical *form* of time persists, there

marily) with texts and words, while a social history employs texts merely as a means of deducing circumstances and movements that are not, in themselves, contained within the texts. Thus, for example, when social history investigates social formations or the construction of constitutional forms—the relations of groups, strata, and classes—it goes beyond the immediate context of action in seeking medium- or long-term structures and their change. Or it might introduce economic theorems for the purpose of scrutinizing individual events and the course of political action. Texts and their attributed conditions of emergence here possess only a referential nature. The methods of *Begriffsgeschichte*, in contrast, derive from the sphere of a philosophical history of terminology, historical philology, semasiology, and onomatology; the results of its work can be evaluated continually through the exegesis of texts, while at the same time, they are based on such exegesis”.

¹ Wang, “Juxtaposing”, 20.

² Wang, “Juxtaposing”, 1.

is no way to eradicate the Chinese habits of drawing experiences from the past to interpret the present. And this is the foundational cause of the ‘enormous pull of Chinese history’ which Wang did not address.

This was the ultimate reason, I argue, why the Cultural Revolution started with the radicals’ insistence on remaking historiography, for the same reason why the French Revolution felt compelled to reinvent the calendar. In both cases, it was the new *forms* of time that held out the promise of truly freeing the old (wo-)men from the moorings that subjugated them in order to transform them into new citizens. To make this pedagogy possible, time had to be restructured to *form* a new (way of) being, a new meaning, and a new world free from old schedules and habits, old rituals and disciplines, and old values.¹



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¹ This formulation is loosely adapted from Mona Ozouf, “Revolutionary Calendar”, in *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, ed. François Furet and Mona Ozouf, transl. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989), 546.

² The Bibliography follows the standard format for citing Chinese sources. Chinese works by Chinese authors are listed without a comma between the last name and first name. Western writings by Chinese authors includes a comma between the two names.

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