Rupture in Modernity:

A Case Study of Radicalism in the Late Qing Chinese Press Debate

Abstract

Drawing on the idea of organic society, this article examines the discourse of modernity in the late Qing press debate between the constitutional monarchist periodical *Xinmin congbao* and the revolutionary republican *Minbao* in 1905–1907. Using a corpus-based analysis, the article identifies the negation of Chinese practices and institutions as contributing to a radicalised discourse. It argues that the loss of anchorage in traditions and experiences erodes the basis of conservatism as a counterbalancing force of social change. The discursive negation constitutes a critical rupture in Chinese modernity. As a broken link between social values and practice, the rupture spawns a utopian imagining of a future China. Revolutions as an extreme form of radicalism are symptomatic of the underlying anxieties of the Chinese collective self that struggles to achieve intellectual and emotional integrity in the pursuit of modernity. The article has three parts. Part one develops a tripartite organic society model to conceptualise the study. Part two presents a critical study of the late Qing press debate. Part three draws some conclusions by discussing the significance and consequences of the discursive patterns of radicalism in the press debate.[1]

Key words: Chinese radicalism, organic society, Chinese modernity, late Qing Chinese press, *Xinmin congbao*, *Minbao*

Introduction

In the 'long revolution in a short twentieth century' (Wang, 2015) from the Xinghai Revolution (1911) to the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), China was engulfed in incessant transformations. In recent decades, scholarship has increasingly focused on the role of revolutions in China's modernisation process (Li and Liu, 1999; Li, 2000; Chen, 2000; Wang, 2015). It highlights the importance of re-evaluating revolutions as a necessary condition to understand modern China. Most scholars tend to consider revolution within a modernisation paradigm, focusing on its efficacy in transforming China. Wang (2015), for example, construes revolutions as a struggle between modernisation and democracy. Xiao (2011) sees revolution as radical modernisation, sparked by the overdue Manchu court reform. Calling for an end to revolutions, Li and Liu (1999: 2) nonetheless affirm the 'moral justification' of the Xinghai Revolution. Fairbank (1986) and Zarrow (2005) discuss revolutions as the vicissitudes of modernisation drives. Yet despite its valuable perspective, the modernisation paradigm has insufficiently explained the intensity, persistence and appeal of revolutions. It may run the risk of a 'normative fallacy' – seeking to assess China against normative assumptions of modernity that may lead research to identify 'deviations' from the 'right' pathways to modernity. Moving beyond the normative paradigm, this article assesses revolutions from the perspective of 'organic society' – how society evolves and deals with challenges as an organic whole and what roles revolution may play in social change. Thus, rather than focusing on struggles for the future, it examines linkages with the past – traditions, customs and institutions. Attention is given to the consequences rather than the desirability of change, to underlying beliefs rather than the strategies to be deployed. Some studies have already taken this route. Jin and Liu (2009), for example, study Chinese radicalism as a transitional phase of absorbing the European impact on China's 'ultra-stable' society from a value-integration perspective.

The aim of this study, however, is a modest one. It seeks to investigate how the idea of modernity is understood and presented in late Qing China by considering the discursive structures of the 'revolution vs. reform' debate in the press. By examining portrayals of social problems and solutions, it investigates the linkages between values systems and social practice. Central to this study is a concern with the way in which late Qing intellectuals approach social changes at a critical historical juncture. During a short period of less than two years, between 1905 and 1907, *Xinmin congbao* (XMCB, from issues No. 73 to 92) and *Minbao* (MB, issues No. 1 to 21) were engaged in a fierce debate over different routes to

modernity. The XMCB advocated 'an enlightened absolutism' as a transition to a constitutional state, but the MB argued for immediate revolution to topple the Manchu dynasty and establish a new republic. The debate became the most significant platform where the rationales, principles and objectives for these two visions of China were articulated. Led by the most influential cultural and political figures of the day, the debate was eagerly read by young literate elites, thanks to the rise of a modern press. The debate spread to more than 20 news magazines in China and beyond to the overseas Chinese communities in Singapore, San Francisco and Los Angeles in an era of profound upheaval, uncertainty, national crisis and a flurry of political activity. For a long time, the debate has been conventionally portrayed as the last conservative resistance to the inevitable revolution that would spread 'enlightenment values' and launch China into the modern age. But this is an incomplete grasp of the debate, its full consequences are yet to be explored. Many key concepts, values, terms and arguments that became prevalent throughout the twentieth century burst onto the scene during the debate. The 1915 New Cultural Campaign and 1919 May Fourth Movement are often viewed as the origins of Chinese radicalism (Li, 2000); and yet their structure of thinking, patterns of discourse and mode of expression resonate with those of the press debate. The debate contributed significantly to the rise of radicalism that 'was born and acquired some of its adult characteristics during the period of 1903–8' argued Gasster (1969: ix) in his study of modern Chinese radicalism. As a prototype of discourse for radical social change, the debate became the prelude to the 'long revolution' of the twentieth century.

The late Qing debate is comparable to the great Anglo-American debate between Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine in the early 1790s over the French Revolution, which gave birth to modern political 'right' and 'left' (Levin, 2014). Both debates concern the justification of a violent removal of an '*ancien régime*'. Both have far-reaching repercussions in shaping the way we conceptualise social change. They are not a genteel intellectual discourse, but part of political actions with profound historical significance. For the Chinese debate, it swayed public opinion towards the revolution that uprooted Chinese society from its millennia-old traditions. The collapse of the Chinese imperial order is not only a political event – it has deep cultural consequences. But unlike the well-studied Burke/Paine debate, the Chinese debate has hitherto drawn scanty attention, incommensurate with its importance.[2] Collingwood (1994: 9–10) postulates that the value of history is to enhance human self-knowledge crucial for understanding 'his nature as man'. Investigating the debate facilitates a deeper understanding of the motivations and ramifications of radical social change. The debate texts provide us with valuable evidence of the mind-set of cultural leaders who were

swept to a position of influence by historical circumstances. The immense power they wielded, amidst dwindling imperial authority, engendered not only violent political actions, but bred a mode of thinking about social change. Before examining the case study, I discuss a tripartite organic social system as a frame of analysis for the debate, drawing on Spencer's (2012) idea of society as an organism, and notions of conservatism and radicalism. This is followed by the case study of press debate. In the final part, I draw some conclusions by discussing the significance of the debate in terms of a utopian tendency in the process of Chinese modernisation.

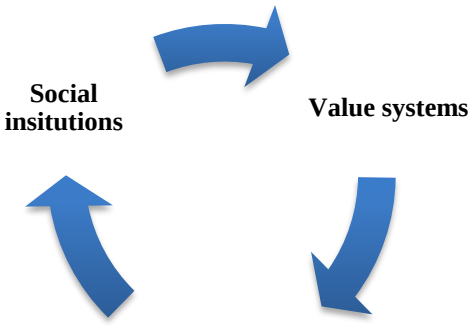
Organic society and social change

A tripartite organic social system

An organic view of society is an ancient conception that emerged in Plato's time. As a key exponent of this view, Spencer (2008: 14) posits that a society is 'a growth and not a manufacture'. The present conditions of society are the result of change in the past that is gradual, continuous and sequential. Spencer further contends that a well-developed society is a necessarily conservative one that tries to maintain the *status quo*, though it must meet external competition whereby change and adaption arise. Central to Spencer's view is the notion of a society as a system comprising an aggregate of interrelated parts seeking to maintain an *equilibrium* through adaptation in the face of a changing environment. Drawing on Spencer's (2008, 2012) and Radcliffe-Brown's (1935, 1940) theories of organic society, I develop a tripartite organic social change model for the analysis of the press debate. Based on evolutionary theory, Spencer (2008: 14) identifies three fundamental aspects of similarity between societies and organisms in their growth: (1) from small groups to large aggregations, (2) from simple to complex structures, and (3) from independent units to an organism with interdependent parts. Key to 'social organism' is the coordination between interdependent parts through 'adaptation', or 'coadaptation' in Radcliffe-Brown's word. The adaptation is a mechanism to maintain the equilibrium of a social organism by changing its functions and structures to adjust to new environing conditions. Social organism is dynamically engaged in a constant process of adaptation. Highlighting the mutual interdependence between constituent parts in social change, Coser (1977: 307) resonates with Spencer's view: 'a complex of forms of processes each of which is living and growing by inter-action with the others, the whole being so unified that what takes place in one part affects all the rest. It is a vast tissue of reciprocal activity.'

Three aspects to social organism, as macro constituent parts, are vitally important – social practice, institutions and values. Social practice consists of everyday human activities to survive in an environment governed by social conventions. It is a patterned way of behaviour evolved over a long period of time through habit, tradition or custom (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 6). Social institutions are formal organisational arrangements like marriage, family and government that grow naturally out of social practice. Their utility and legitimacy are internalised by members of society. Institutions are collectively sanctioned, continuous and established social practice. Radcliffe-Brown (1940: 9) defined social institutions as 'standardised modes of behaviour' that 'constitute the machinery by which a social structure, a network of social relations, maintains its existence and its continuity'. Social values operate at the symbolic level as a metaphorical approval of institutionalised social practice. They give 'meaning' to social practice to confirm its validity and confer to it sanctity in the form of 'truths'. Abstract values include political, economic, moral, cultural and aesthetic dimensions that function to affirm, promote, consolidate and reproduce institutionalised social practice. Social stability relies heavily on consensual values in what Emile Durkheim calls the 'conscience collective' through socialisation (Edgar and Sedgwick, 1999: 432). Malinowski highlights the importance of linking human practice with abstract and theoretical aspects of human thought and verbal usage. 'The real understanding of words ultimately derives from active experiences of those aspects of reality to which the words belong' (Malinowski, 1935: 35). Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between social practice, institutions and values.

Figure 1: Structure of social change



In this tripartite organic system of social change, practice, institutions and values are intrinsically linked in a process of adaptation to changing conditions. Habitual practice as recurrent daily activities evolve into social institutions, and settled institutions evolve into social values. Internalised as a set of beliefs, values are expressed in the symbolic world to regulate practices and institutions. Each of these three parts fulfils a specific function – practice meets daily survival needs; institutions provide stability of practice; and values reproduce institutionalised practice by assuring the society at large of its validity, efficacy and adequateness. From organic society's perspective, function is defined as a contribution that 'a partial activity makes to the total activity of which it is a part' (Radcliffe-Brown, 1935: 397). The three interrelated parts operate to achieve what Radcliffe-Brown calls 'a functional unity' – all work together to attain consistency and harmony by reducing frictions and conflicts. 'Functional unity' resonates with Spencerian 'equilibration' – the process of gradually reducing oscillations around the mean in a society. It is in this sense that Spencer defines a social system as 'a whole whose parts are held together by complex forces that are ever re-balancing themselves – a whole whose moving equilibrium is continually disturbed and continually rectified' (in Carneiro 1973: 84). Spencer identifies organic growth in a *directional* movement from simplicity to complexity, and in a *relational* movement from independence to interdependence. But the tripartite social system constitutes a *cyclical* movement between practice, institutions and values. The first two modes of movements involve organic expansion in quantity and quality, the cyclical movement operates to preserve the system in meeting changed conditions both within and without. As an organic unity, a society is a cumulative process consisting of a self-reinforcing cyclical movement of reproduction, adjustment and adaption.

Organic society: equilibration between conservatism and radicalism

Governed by a principle similar to a natural organism, society is vulnerable to sudden and drastic change. The way in which change is managed is vital to maintain its equilibrium. Change creates disturbance that triggers a process of equilibration by which imbalance between a system and the forces acting on it is reduced until a new balance is struck. The shifting equilibrium requires the recurring necessity of equilibration to adjust the system for optimal performance, survival and growth.

Attitudes to societal change occur in a spectrum between conservatism preferring minimal change, and radicalism preferring maximal change. Conservatism arises as reaction to radicalism, which tends to move faster than social systems can adapt to. Conservatism

moves more slowly than required, to respond adequately to new conditions. As a political philosophy promoting traditional practice and institutions, conservatism favours gradual development to maintain the *status quo*. Radicalism supports swift and fundamental changes. Derived largely from Burke's 1790 *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, conservatism has become a pertinent stance to social change. As a conservative statesman, Burke holds misgivings about radical alterations of society. Suspicious about abstract ideas that have not stood the test of time, Burke (2004: 23) commented, 'I have no great opinion of that sublime abstract, metaphysic reversionary, contingent humanity, which in cold blood can subject the present time and those whom we daily see and converse with to immediate calamities in favour of the future and uncertain benefit of persons who only exist in idea.' Opposed to the French Revolution, Burke did not fear France itself, but the kind of *thinking* that produced the events in France, and people who intended to introduce such thinking into England. At the heart of Burke's conservatism is his tenacious belief in 'a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born' (2004: 194–5). Clearly, Burke's conservatism is sensitive to the interdependent nature of society comprising practice and institutions as accumulation of historical experiences. It is a system-maintaining force preserving the existing equilibrium. Radicalism is a system-changing force aiming at rapid adaption to the perceived change of conditions. Edgar and Sedgwick (1999: 79) summarise conservatism as having (1) a negative attitude towards social change, (2) a faith in traditional moral and political values, (3) a general pessimistic view of human nature, and (4) seeing society as an interconnected structure of relationships. Favouring alterations to social structures in a fundamental way, radicalism is characterised by its advocacy of revolutionary means to achieve its objectives. The word radical means going to the root or origin; radicalism thus indicates the change of the roots of social practice, institutions and values. Radicalism has few qualms of upsetting the social system – its purpose is precisely to break the existing equilibrium for desired changes to occur.

One way to ascertain if a society is in an optimal mode of performance is to assess to what extent social practice, institutions and values are in congruence with one another.

The Great Press Debate

Background to the press debate and method

Xinmin congbao was established by Liang Qichao in 1902 in Yokohama, Japan, after the failed 100-day reform when Liang was appointed as advisor to the young Emperor Guangxu (1871–1908). Having escaped to Japan, Liang continued to promote his reform agenda through the XMCB. The bi-monthly was later published irregularly and closed down in 1907 after producing 96 issues. *Minbao* was established in August 1905 in Tokyo, Japan, as an official organ of *Tongmenhui* (United Alliance Society) – the predecessor of the Nationalist Party. Initially a monthly, publication became erratic in later years. Key *Tongmenhui* members edited the MB, including Hu Hanmin, Zhang Binglin and Tao Chengzhang. It published 24 issues before its closure in October 1908.[3] The debate between the two publications started officially on 8 April 1906 when the MB published its declaration of a 'war of words' on the XMCB, accusing the latter of contributing to China's 'immediate death' by its advocacy of a constitutional monarchy. The MB raised 12 points of dispute with the XMCB and vowed to expose its folly. The debate continued into early 1907 when the XMCB pleaded for a 'ceasefire'. For our analysis, two corpora were created, each consisting of all articles on either side of the debate. The total size of the dataset is 231,781 Chinese characters. The data for this study are selected from key articles of the debate: nine from the XMCB and 16 from the MB.

Word frequency analysis: changing values system as a common ground

A significant feature of the debate is the identical values system the two sides shared in constructing their arguments. As Table 1 shows, politics dominates the 20 most frequently occurring conceptual nouns, centring around post-enlightenment liberal democracy. Sixteen of the top 20 nouns are identical in the two publications. These high-frequency terms operate as lexical foci of the debate. They constitute the macrostructure that determines the debate's global meaning under two subthemes – nation-state and modern institutions. Subsumed under the term 'state' (occurring 1,145 times in the 25 articles) are 'citizenry' (979), 'society' (391), 'people' (388) and 'race' (308). The second subtheme comprises 'government' (733), 'absolutism' (636), 'republicanism' (457) and 'state organs' (450). The overlexicalization through the high word frequency of key terms controls deductively local sequential propositions of the 12 points of dispute. Within an underlying consensus, the contested differences are limited to the narrow topic of the means of achieving political goals – if a revolution is justified. Opposed to revolution, the XMCB makes a case for an 'enlightened absolutism' as a transition to constitutional politics. Aiming to establish an immediate republic, the MB sees no alternative but to launch a revolution.

It is important to distinguish between social reality and representation of social reality. Social practice and institutions are in the physical world while values sit in the symbolic world of representation. Practice and institutions are regulated through representation by correlating them with these high-frequency terms in a 'conceptual map' (Hall, 1997). The map consists not only of individual concepts expressed in these terms, but different ways of organising, classifying and clustering them, and of establishing complex relations between them. It is the interactions between these concepts as an 'epistemic structure' (Van Dijk, 2014: 228) that generate meanings in the debate. For example, the top three high-frequency nouns 'state', 'citizen' and 'revolution' are semantically linked to three clusters of terms that are combined to produce discursive formations of three novel perspectives on state, people and social change. This shifts the Chinese traditional worldview of *tianxia* (all under heaven) to the Western 'nation-state', imperial 'subjects' to autonomous 'citizens', and 'rebellion' as a means for a cyclical change of dynasty to 'revolution' as a progressive removal of an *ancien régime*. Dispersed through the texts, these clusters function as a discursive motor driving local narrative forward normatively in liberal politics and radical economics (see analysis later). They structure new beliefs, convictions and visions by deploying a fresh episteme in addressing late Qing challenges of external encroachment, internal decay and a heightened sense of national crisis. The hierarchical structure governed by the high-frequency words defines the overall coherence of the discourse about new visions of state structure, people's identities and mode of social change.

Table 1: Top 20 most frequently occurring nouns

No.	***Xingmin congbao***	***Minbao***
1	State (496)	Revolution (649
2	Citizenry (492)	State (509)
3	Revolution (447)	Citizenry (487)
4	Absolutism (429)	China (425)
5	Government (371)	Government (362)
6	Politics (369)	**Land (328)**
7	China (331)	Politics (296
8	Republicanism (313)	Manchuria (272)
9	State organ (247)	Society (260)
10	**Enlightenment (218)**	Problem (235)
11	People (208)	Absolutism (207)

12	**Constitution (165)**	State organ (203)
13	Monarch (164)	**Capital (191)**
14	Doctrine (158)	People (180)
15	Problem (153)	Doctrine (175)
16	Manchuria (138)	Race (164)
17	**Liberty (135)**	**Objectives (154)**
18	Race (134)	Republicanism (144)
19	Society (131)	Monarch (138)
20	**Parliament (119)**	**Policy (133)**

(Notes: Numbers in bracket indicate word frequency. Words in bold occur only in one publication.)

Minimal references are drawn from Chinese traditions, as shown in Table 2. Presented as evidence of Chinese practice now found in the modern West, the XMCB enlisted classical Legalism, Confucianism and Moism as the Chinese version of 'enlightened absolutism' in nineteenth-century Europe. Chinese thinkers Confucius and Xunzi were eulogised as exemplary 'enlightened absolutists'. Legalism is singled out as possessing superior wisdom of enlightened absolutism – a form of government whose restoration is long overdue. In the only seven Chinese references the MB draws, Mencius' morality is brought up to celebrate its revolutionary audacity. Statesmen Guanzi (725–645BC) and Shang Yang (390–338BC) were compared to Otto von Bismarck and Camillo Benso. Deprived of its epistemic autonomy, Chinese intellectual tradition is reduced to an appendix to post-enlightenment politics. In addition to being a rhetorical device, this mode of referencing the classics is what historian Yu Ying-shih (1993: 126) calls 'interpretation as discovery'. That is, finding instances of Western practice in Chinese classics, and presenting it as existing or originating in China. Yu argues that late Qing intellectuals from Yan Fu to Kang Youwei discovered in the West a better alternative to Chinese learning; but rather than presenting it as a discovery they disguised it as reinterpretation of Chinese classics. This could be attributed to the Chinese critical tradition that criticism is confined to interpretation of 'the Way', rather than inventing or discovering new ones. The new 'Western Way' had to be cloaked in a Chinese guise. Obviously, Liang, as the XMCB's sole writer, had moved beyond 'reinterpretation', though this mode of writing lingers on. Liang's scanty allusion to Chinese sources reveals his relinquishment of the traditional repertoire. The MB revolutionary writers, on the other hand, saw no point in seeking validation from Chinese classics. Neither side saw traditional learning as a source of knowledge, authority or legitimacy.

Table 2: Word frequency of Chinese sources in the press debate

Category	Terms	XMCB	MB	Total
Chinese intellectual traditions	Legalism	11		11
	Confucianism	5		5
	Taoism	2		2
	Moism	2		2
	Lao-zhuang	1		1
Chinese philosophers/7 statesmen	Mencius	4	3	7
	Confucius	5		5
	Mozi	5		5
	Shangyang	2	2	4
	Guanzi	3	2	5
	Laozi	1		1
	Hanfei	1		1
	Xunzi	1		1
Total		43	7	50
Percentage		86%	14%	100%

Keyword analysis: battle between liberal politics and radical economics

To uncover the thematic differences in the debate, I turn to 'keyword' as an analytical tool to examine the salient features of each side. WordSmith Tool's 'keyword' function was performed to generate the two keyword lists. A keyword appears in a corpus statistically significantly more frequently than would be expected by chance when compared to another corpus (Baker, 2006: 125). Keywords are calculated by comparing the frequency of each word in the XMCB corpus with the frequency of the same word in the MB corpus. Table 3 shows how certain terms are used significantly more by one side than the other. The degree of difference is measured by a 'keyness' index. For example, the keyness of the term 'absolutism' is 120.51, suggesting it is the most salient word in the XMCB compared to the MB. The higher the score the stronger the keyness of that word. Keyness value gives an accurate and gradable account of the strength of salient terms in the debate. The lists shown in the table are derived from collecting all conceptual nouns in the keyword lists until the

keyness index drops to or near zero. Zero keyness would suggest no statistical difference exists for a term between the two corpora.

Table 3: Keyword list in the debate

No	XMCB		MB	
	Keyword	*Keyness*	*Keyword*	*Keyness*
1	Absolutism	120.51	Capital	136.70
2	Republicanism	95.25	Production	97.21
3	Enlightenment	71.08	Landlord	94.01
4	Parliament	68.04	Capitalists	85.54
5	Constitution	56.89	Land	80.59
6	Military government	52.99	Land rent	80.26
7	Parliament[4]	49.39	Journalist	58.25
8	Will	42.14	Sun Yet-san	53.10
9	Legislation	36.94	Price	52.68
10	Pre-condition	30.36	Rent	52.12
11	Supervision	29.11	Public debts	45.49
12	Opinion	27.29	Pricing	42.98
13	Party	25.14	Price	41.75
14	Politics	24.71	Method	40.03
15	Current government	24.21	State ownership	39.61
16			Population	39.55
17			Distribution	38.39
18			People's livelihood	38.04
19			Income	36.39
20			Foreign capital	31.56
21			Tax	31.70
22			Socialism	29.87
23			Democracy	29.32
24			Industry	27.82
25			Land price	27.31
26			Land	27.31
27			Nation	25.58
28			Manchuria	25.30
29			Society	24.75

30			Europe & the United States	24.34

In the epistemic macrostructure of word frequency, *global* coherence is achieved by applying a post-enlightenment conceptual frame. Meaning is derived from direct relations between key concepts. However, the disputes are debated through *referential* coherence realised in sequential local microstructures. That is, arguments are made by manipulating relations between historical facts referred to and those represented subjectively in the debate. Meaning is produced by relations between represented events in local narratives in terms of temporality and causality. For example, the Manchus are presented by the MB as *causing* China's problems and therefore must be removed through an ethnic revolution. But the XMCB sees the Manchus as part of the Chinese nation and therefore a reformed Manchu court is part of the solution to shared problems. The disputes are therefore argued by reference to underlying subjective and intersubjective mental models of late Qing social realities. The debate is limited to ways of social change – practicality, technicality, temporality, etc.

A notable aspect of the keyword lists is the contrasting priorities of each side. The XMCB focuses on constitutionalist *liberal politics*, but the MB on socialist *radical economics*. It is significant that 50% of the XMCB keywords are identical to its top 20 high-frequency nouns, but only 13% of MB's terms coincide with its top 20 nouns. This indicates the XMCB applies the same conceptual map as its epistemic macrostructure for global and local meanings. For the MB, a different subset of values – radical socialist economics – is applied as the sequential microstructure for local meanings. This discrepancy shows the XMCB is committed to liberal politics despite its seemingly conservative advocacy of 'enlightened absolutism'. In contrast, the MB is committed to radical socialism for economic egalitarianism in addition to political equality. The XMCB anticipates considerable obstacles in achieving liberal democracy; but the MB envisions barriers brought crashing down in the pursuit of social justice. But in the end, the XMCB has greater difficulties in promoting its programme, largely because 'absolutism' is a negative and emotionally-charged term associated with the corrupt, autocratic Manchu rule under Cixi the dowager. The MB's moral stance of socialism works on a different aspect of emotions. It is semantically linked to an unequal economic structure where 'capital' is portrayed as the chief means through which an elite minority control and exploit the majority. 'Capital' as a negative term tops the MB keyword list as the most significant concept that drives local narratives.

Invoking state theories of Bornhak and Bluntschli, the XMCB underpins its argument for constitutionalism in a semantic cluster of 'parliament', 'constitution', 'government', 'legislation', 'supervision' and '(political) party'. It activates a schematic knowledge of incremental institutionalism. Citing 'enlightened' Prussian Frederick the Great, Russian Emperor Peter the Great and Empress Catherine the Great as models Manchu monarchs could emulate, the XMCB argues a powerful monarch with a modern mind could make systematic and rational attempts to modernise China. The paradox of the XMCB position lies in the seeming incompatibility between advocacy of absolute monarchy and promotion of liberal institutions. Focusing on radical economics, the MB highlights socialist principles in two thirds of its keywords including 'capital', 'production', 'landlord', 'capitalists', 'land', 'rent' and 'price'. The semantic cluster operates under the political frame of 'people's livelihood', 'state ownership', 'democracy' and 'nation' that constitute Sun Yetsan's 'three People's Principles' – nationalism, people's rights and people's livelihood. The keywords' semantic focus shows 'people's livelihood', or social reform, represents the MB's most significant difference with the XMCB. Committed to egalitarian reform, the MB collapses the temporal frame required of social change into a single revolution. The focus on a 'post-revolution' social reform reveals the MB's grand design of social engineering, with little attention to the social consequences the XMCB is worried about. The XMCB underscores the present conditions as the basis for a practical solution, but the MB underlines future objectives of ideal goals to achieve. Nevertheless, sharing similar future visions, neither engages seriously with the past.

Ascertaining social reality: rationale for social change

The late Qing debate has a different nature from the Burke/Paine debate. The latter has a distinct tradition to preserve or to break away from. For Burke, the inherited practice and institutions have their natural values as accumulation of human experiences. For Paine, progressive principles should guide political actions in changing practices and institutions unfit for higher ideals. They underpin their arguments in different sets of worldviews opposed to each other. Their dispute concerns such fundamental issues as nature, history, society, reason, freedom, equality and political institutions. In the XMCB/MB debate, the two sides share the same inspiration to break away from Chinese traditions – there was little they sought to preserve, except that the XMCB favours retention of the monarchy as the transition to modern politics. Both underpin their arguments with the fundamental values of enlightenment – the XMCB focusing on liberal constitutionalism and the MB on radical

socialism. The substantial division between them, however, is (1) their approach to achieve modern politics, and (2) their assessment of social reality as rationale for political action. As Table 4 shows, out of the 12 points of dispute, nine (75%) focus on the approach to achieve the desired changes. The remaining three involve institutions (Disputes 1 and 12) and social practice (Dispute 3). The republicanism vs. absolutism dispute relates to different timeframes to achieve liberal politics, because absolutism is a bridge to constitutionalism. Socialism was an imaginative institution at the time of the debate as it had never existed in human history, except local experiments in Europe and America. The socialism dispute concerns mainly the issue of practicality of a socialist system in agrarian China. Nonetheless it is part of European post-enlightenment social imagining.

Table 4: Twelve points of debate

	Minbao	***Xinmin congbao***	**Practice**	**Institution**	**Approach**
1	Republicanism	Absolutism		√	
2	Constitutionalism by means of democracy	Enlightened absolutism from the government			√
3	Revolution because of evil government	Absolutist government because of bad people	√		
4	Revolution and education as means	No idea what to do			√
5	Political as well as ethnic revolution	Enlightened absolutism and political reform			√
6	Political revolution to overthrow the monarch and ethnic revolution to drive out the Manchus	Political revolution and ethnic revolutions are incompatible.			√
7	Political revolution demands force	Political revolution needs petition			√
8	Force is the basis of a revolutionary cause	Coercion comes only after petition fails			√
9	Other than refusal to pay taxes and assassination, revolution has its own means	Coercion takes the form of refusing to pay taxes and of assassination			√
10	Nihilists are revolutionary, not mere assassins	Revolution is undesirable; nihilism is necessary			√
11	Revolution for a republic	Revolution begets dictatorship			√
12	Advocate socialism to solve future social problems	Socialism only agitates beggars and the homeless[5]		√	
			8.3%	16.7%	75%

What is of importance is the assessment of Chinese practice, institutions and values as the second area of major division. This assessment underlies the rationales behind the arguments for all other 11 disputes. The MB believes the way the Manchu government behaves constitutes the fundamental problem; but the XMCB sees the problem located in the

ignorance and backwardness of the people. Thus, the XMCB holds the people responsible for the predicament China finds itself in. The MB holds the 'foreign' Manchu government accountable because it is illegitimate, corrupt and effectual. The MB argues evil governments produce ignorant people, not the other way around. For the XMCB, the Chinese people are unqualified for a modern republic because they do not understand what are 'nation' and 'state', let alone the existence of other countries. What is worse, they are submissive subjects, not independent citizens. Liang elaborated this view in his 20 XMCB articles between 1902 and 1906, published later as a book, *Discourse on New Citizen*. Liang contends in the book: 'China is destined to extinction, not due to foreign aggressions or the evil government, but to the heartlessness, brainlessness and timidity of its 400 million people. It is the dumbness of its people that has driven China to almost extinction'. Liang sees no alternative but allowing a longer timeframe for people to become 'new citizens'. Otherwise, he argues, China would descend into a chaos of infighting in the vacuum of effective political authority – thereby inviting foreign intervention and colonial occupation. On closer examination, these conclusions are not drawn from considered empirical evidence, but from measuring Chinese sociocultural identities against European post-enlightenment values. This categorical, rather than analytical mode of presentation is part of a discourse of denial and negation of indigenous social realities, conditions and social evolution. The emotionally-charged style of writing, though toned down later, reflects the nature of the debate as a political polemic. It inspires political actions to change society rather than encouraging empirical investigation to understand society. More importantly, the publications rely on their arguments to appeal to the reading pubic for support. Ultimately, the polemic is deployed for political mobilisation. Each saw in the other a dangerous agenda that threatened to derail its modernisation programme. The stakes could not be higher.

Radicalism, revolution and the rupture

Reverse social change and the break with traditions

Within an externally derived conceptual map, the XMCB and MB debate different routes to modernity. Frustrated by decades of failings to meet external challenges, they hasten to measure Chinese practices against post-enlightenment values. The anachronous comparison leads to a reverse order of social change. Rather than responding to change from practice in a Spencerian 'spontaneous evolutionary process', they advocate installation of Western institutions inspired by liberal politics that have little bearing on Chinese experiences. Such

institutions are either imposed through a revolution or by pressuring a social entity (e.g. the monarchy) to comply. Thus, a reverse process occurs – change starts from abstract values and moves to institutions as materialisation of values, and finally to practice as mechanically imposed behaviour. A reverse process of change tends to occur in an externally-induced social change as in the case of late Qing China, because it is not social practice that demands adjustment, but the external impact that threatens to damage the social organism. As a social system in a stable equilibrium, social practice and institutions operate to reinforce the system and therefore are averse to change – they are the conservative system-maintaining force. Thus, the first casualty of reverse social change is inevitably traditions. It is not a chance casualty but a targeted one, because traditions are seen as liabilities, not assets. Under external pressures, survival instincts dictate drastic actions to be taken as an adaptation for equilibration. But there is a problem – a society is a cumulative process that consists of a self-reinforcing cyclical movement of practice, institutions and values as an organic unity.

As Figures 2 and 3 show, the reverse order creates a break between external values and indigenous practice. Drastic alteration in the values system puts a considerable strain on the relationship between institutions and practice, in particular between values and practice. As institutions and values are introduced as one (organic) package, it needs to be imposed on society. This imposition instigates a substantial disturbance to the social organism, activating a process of Spencerian 'adaptive metamorphosis' (in Simon, 1960: 295) or 'indirect equilibration' – re-establishment of equilibrium between surviving society and its new environment (Carneiro, 1973: 89). Fully aware of the need to impose institutions in China, both sides of the debate were ready to apply coercion. For the MB, the imposition involves not only a revolution to remove the *ancien régime* of the Manchu dynasty, but on society through a three-step phase of 'military government', 'supervisory government' before a 'constitutional government' can be installed. For the XMCB, 'a political revolution' is required to bring about 'enlightened absolutism' – involving such means as assassinations and refusal to pay taxes. 'Enlightened' is a condition imposed on the monarch to serve national rather than dynastic interests. 'Absolutism' is imposed on society as a necessary authoritarian rule to 'modernise' it. Institutions as rules can be imposed top-down on society by coercion, but it is much harder to force people to accept values that have little relevance to their lives. For social practice to be reproduced spontaneously, there needs to be an organic link between social practice and values. It is here that the exercise of coercion finds its limits – people can be forced to change their external behaviour, but not how they think. A crack

appears in the organic society, breaking the link between values and the reproduction of practices, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 2: Triangular link in the organic society

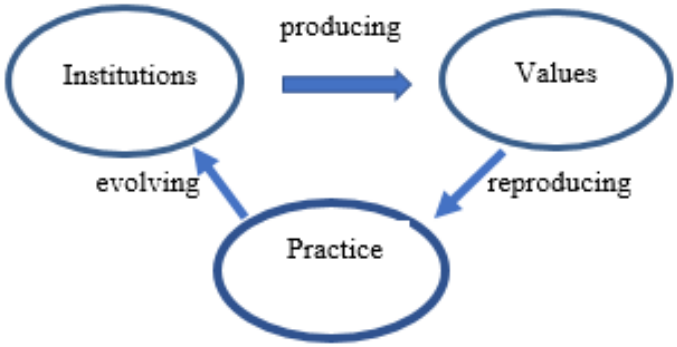
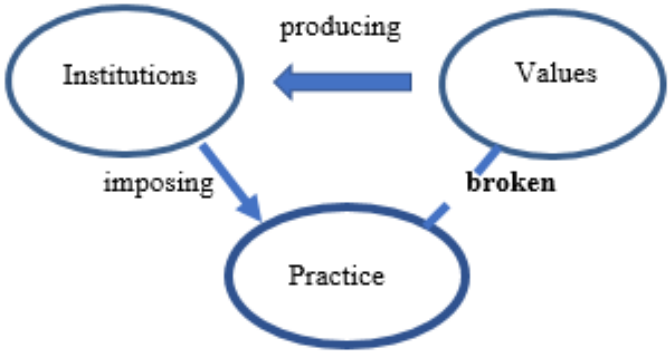


Figure 3: Broken link in the press debate



Negation, radicalism and revolution

In their negative assessment of late Qing society, these debaters were driven to build a better future (see Table 5). By targeting social identity to develop 'new citizens' in a social campaign, the XMCB is as radical as the MB that seeks to impose new institutions in a political campaign. However, both sides lose anchorage in social reality in their negation of indigenous practice and institutions. They do not identify what is worth preserving, and therefore fail to define a social position. The negation takes the implicit form of discursive absence or non-recognition of Chinese traditions, and the explicit form of sweeping criticisms of Chinese practice. The loss of anchorage means the absence of a reference system of

standards or benchmark, against which conservative or radical positions are identified and articulated. The nature of the debate is located therefore not in differing views of what to preserve, but in a binary opposition between the negative present and a positive future. Empirical reality slips out of view in an argument about ideologies. The missing referential benchmark is a key source of radicalisation – nothing is protected or free from change. As Yu (1993: 141) argues, people in early twentieth-century China were driven by ever newer ideologies in a 'neoterist mentality – a mentality obsessed with change, with what is new'.

Table 5: Summary of the press debate

Areas	XMCB	MB
Values	Fundamental change	Fundamental change
Institutions	Incremental but fundamental change	Immediate and fundamental change
Practice	Change bad people	Change bad government
Means	Reform	Revolution

Imposing change disturbs the natural coordination between different parts; as Spencer argues, 'to interfere with this process by producing premature development in any particular direction is inevitably to disturb the true balance of organisation by causing somewhere else a corresponding atrophy' (in Carneiro, 1960: 297). The atrophy in the Chinese case is traditions, which came under severe and sustained attack. Radicalism takes the ultimate form of revolution – an uncompromising stance and actions of destroying the old in establishing the new. The stronger the force for change, the greater the power of revolution. As the negation of traditions grew stronger in the late 1910s May Fourth Movement, a full-blown iconoclastic attack on Confucianism became inevitable. Late Qing intellectual radicalism contributes significantly to the 1911 Xinghai Revolution and indirectly to 'the long revolution' throughout the century. The press debate created a prototypical discursive structure to talk about social change. First, the discursive absence of anchorage in society – nothing is fixed for preservation; nothing is spared the force of sweeping change. Second, traditions and modernity are seen through an antagonistic rather than accommodating lens. A mechanistic view of replacement (of the old with the new) is premised on the discourse of negation – a continuous negation of not only the past as traditions, but the present as accumulation of the past. This 'new-as-progressive' discourse reduces fundamental values such as equality and liberty to a ritualistic, mechanical act of substitution. Third, a discourse

of coercion is moralised in an elitist authoritarian imposition of rules as an act of progress much like imperial benevolence is bestowed to subjects. Fourth, a utopian vision of the future is implicit in the discourse of change. Ironically, the broken link between values and practice enhances utopian tendencies of talking about the future, because utopian discourse bears less burden of empirical practicality when the past and much of the present are dispensed to the land of 'dystopia'.

These discursive features constitute much of the radicalising tendencies towards social change. However, radicalism can be viewed as a coping strategy for a social system to deal with extensive external impact, perceived to threaten the survival of the whole system. It is a type of overcompensation for the lack of available intellectual resources in a reverse-order social change, necessitated also by the required rapid equilibration and considerable inertia of a large and deeply conservative society like China. Radicalism as overcompensation operates predominantly in the symbolic world of values in a top-down, mechanistic, authoritarian mode of enforcement. It is characterised by a high level of abstraction because intangible values deal with mental models of reality rather than reality itself. Radicalism is also imbued with heavy doses of moralism since mobilisation of support relies not only on immediate material interests but appeal to higher ideals. It may require sacrifice from participants as in the case of revolutions. The moral high ground is not a guarantee of success but it is a necessary condition. Emotion is essential to radicalism as people respond to emotion as much as, if not more than, intellect. Radicalism resorts to and thrives on rhetorical power.

However, radicalism and its extreme form of revolution are symptomatic of a schism in late Qing China and throughout the twentieth century. It is the rupture between traditions and modernity. The enduring energies and momentum of the long revolution arose from a persistent negation of the past, and the constant pull of a utopian future. It is human nature to have a meaningful connection not only with the future, but also with the past to achieve a coherent conceptual self both for individuals and society. This view lies at the heart of Burke's defence of historical experiences as the foundation of a healthy society. It is hard to predict when the pendulum of equilibration will swing back from its overcompensation, but coming to terms with traditions and locating a meaningful connection between the past, the present and future constitute a major challenge on the Chinese road to modernity.

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[2] It is important to note that there are many studies on this debate but few have dealt with it thoroughly.
[3]Two more issues were published secretly in early 2010.
[4] The Chinese terms '议院' and '议会' both mean 'parliament'.
[5] The translation from Chinese is based on that of Tang (1996: 149–50).