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Articles

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China (1909–14)  
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## **Editors' Introduction**

What use is Chinese studies in a pandemic? In these extraordinary times, what can our discipline offer to enhance understanding and provide different perspectives, or simply information, as we are trying to manage an unprecedented global crisis? At a moment when hard scientists are back in favour, what can a different type of expert contribute that is of benefit beyond our academic community and of value to enhancing our response here in Britain?

We received an overwhelming response to this call for short papers, from scholars across the globe. We have selected sixteen to be included in this issue. Together, they address the question from a full range of disciplines, including cross-cultural education, classical sinology, law, media studies, linguistics, gender studies, critical cultural studies, art history, political science, diaspora studies, literary studies, economics, international relations, history, and sociology. Each paper makes an important point about the utility of the humanities and interpretive social sciences in a moment of crisis. We emphasise that the views expressed in these papers are the authors' own and do not necessarily represent the position of the journal.

These short papers are a new format for the journal. We will continue to expand the type of contributions we seek to publish while retaining our focus as an academic, peer-reviewed journal. Our section of substantive articles once again not only showcases the breadth of Chinese studies in this country, but also offers food for thought and proves the relevance of our field to the contemporary situation. In the opening article, Tim Barrett invites us to ponder meditation as a method of creative inspiration in the poetry of the Tang period, with the aim of fuelling our contemporary interest in poetry translation in the United Kingdom. What better pursuit in a time when our travels are mostly in the realm of the imaginary!

Ernest Leung and Yan Quan, on their part, analyse China's brief experiment with constitutional democracy and representative government during the early twentieth century. Their account of events shows that the period from 1909 to 1914 provided Chinese society and its elected representatives with important training in modern parliamentary struggle. They identify the rejection of all compromise as a key factor in the failed experiment, but also caution that the worst consequence of a failed experiment with democratisation is the loss of faith in the objective of democratisation itself, as was the case with the Chinese political elite at the time – a loss of faith that continues to hold sway in today's PRC. But of course, we must not forget that in the 1990s the very same KMT achieved the first successful democratic transition in Chinese history through a consensus-based revision of the constitution.

In the third substantive paper of this issue, Astrid Nordin and Graham Mark Smith review, unpack, and question understandings of responsibility in the debates about China. They argue that existing debates all operate with a remarkably similar

understanding of responsibility framed around rules and norms. Whether China adopts existing rules and norms, or whether it establishes rules and norms of its own, responsibility is understood as compliance. Nordin and Smith add to the debate by employing a Derridian approach that is conscious of the irresolvable dilemma when faced with the demands of multiple others. They argue that such an understanding is helpful insofar as it reminds those who would call for responsibility that such responsibility, and politics itself, is more than simply following rules and maintenance of norms.

We close this note with a reminder that we are fully open access, free of charge, double-blind peer reviewed, and offer well-above-average editorial support, especially for early-career researchers. All of the editorial team work in a voluntary capacity. It is a true “labour of love,” which is also the title of a soon-to-be-published Open Access Manifesto, to whose principles and wordings we have contributed and to which we are fully signed up. As humanities and social science scholars, the authors of the manifesto want to reclaim the project of Open Access and key it to a different register of shared creativity and responsibility; we challenge the many enclosures to which we as scholars and knowledge workers in research institutions tacitly consent. We believe that the future of a more accessible, ethical, transparent, and creative form of scholarly communication largely relies on a *labour of love* – unremunerated, off-work time that is freely given as a result of political, emotional, and otherwise idealistic investment in projects that transcend the quest for academic prestige and seek to transform the publishing system from within.

In this spirit, we want to fully acknowledge the generous support given to BJoCS by Tom Marling, our meticulous new copy editor, and by Séagh Kehoe, who joined the journal as guest editor for this issue and whose input in the selection and editing of the position papers was invaluable. Thank you both for your labour of love which made this issue happen.

*Gerda Wielander*

## Zen and the “Image” in Tang Poetry

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### Abstract

*Poetry based upon the presentation of a striking image has been familiar in English for over a century; in China it is much older, and in the second half of the eighth century it was already being discussed using the word jingjie 境界 or simply jing. While the Buddhist overtones of this term have been noted, the degree to which it was widely used in a discourse of meditation that stretched well beyond the scholastic works of the Buddhist clergy has not. Meditation as a source of unbidden images would seem to be part of a late eighth century and early ninth century interest in the wellsprings of poetic creativity also manifest in discourse about intoxication and poetry. While there is no direct connection with Anglophone interest in Imagism, a possible indirect connection via Japanese and French may be worth investigating in the future.*

**Keywords:** Ezra Pound, Imagism, Chan (Zen) and poetry, Wang Wei, meditation and poetry.

The purpose of the title of this piece is to suggest that behind the bland exterior of the average medieval Chinese poem (at least in English translation) there may lurk processes of composition entirely unsuspected by the modern reader, aspects of the Tang poem that might repay greater study. This approach – namely meditation as a method of creative inspiration – was far from universal in the poetry of the Tang period, since it seems to have arisen within specific historical circumstances, and though references to it remained and were handed down to later ages in widely read works, it is at present unclear how actively it was practised in later times. However, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that an interest in poetic imagery remained strong in East Asia, raising the possibility that it was this aspect of poetic practice there that caught the attention of English-language poets in the United Kingdom at the start of the twentieth century, as they cast about for new models to replace the poetry of Victorian times. The hope is that drawing attention to this approach to poetic inspiration in this essay may serve as a challenge to the current lack of interest in Chinese poetry translation in the United Kingdom.

Before we can delve into our observations, it is necessary to clarify the term “Zen.” In China *chan* 禪 simply meant “meditation” and masters of meditation were not necessarily affiliated with the distinctive tradition that took this name, any more than all who baptise in Christian circles would claim to be Baptists. In the view of modern scholarship, the Zen tradition emerged only slowly in China: the eighth

century certainly had a notion of certain lineages of meditation teachers who claimed to carry forward a non-verbalised heritage of insight stretching back to the Buddha, but the coherence of these lineages into a broader tradition seems to be more a feature of the ninth century. Meanwhile larger shifts were, during this span of time, taking place across the Chinese intellectual world as a whole, especially in the unsettled conditions following the near-collapse of the dynasty in the mid-eighth century. Broadly speaking, while in the two centuries before this shift many Chinese had conceptualised their culture as existing on two levels, one relating to indigenous traditions and another at a higher level reflecting the imported wisdom of Buddhism (Barrett, 2009), now there was a move towards intellectual integration in the face of a threatened political fragmentation, either by collapsing the higher level into the lower by declaring Buddhism redundant within China's culture, or by synthesising both levels of culture more closely. The phenomena discussed here fit readily into the second trend, though the basic insight underlying the developments discussed was no doubt well understood well before its implications for the composition of poetry started to be worked out, namely that *unanticipated* visionary experiences could be achieved by Buddhist meditative practice (Greene, 2016: 321).<sup>1</sup> The language used to describe this may legitimately be termed "technical" (Greene, 2016: 322), but this should not lead us to ignore its importance or broad influence. One purpose of the following observations is to stress that the "technical" term involved was not by any means an abstruse one, but rather was one that – like many Buddhist elements in the language of the Tang regarded as difficult and exotic today – was very widely used and understood. No attempt is however made in this essay to situate this phenomenon within any broader discourse on Buddhism and Tang poetry. The aim is instead to present a fragment of this whole in the hope that it may pique the interest of others to delve further, or at least to start reading Tang poetry in the original with an eye to the many unexplored issues that it raises.

Much ink has of course already been spilled on the relationship of Chan Buddhism to poetry, but unfortunately from the point of view of the historian of religion not enough attention has been paid to evolving historical factors. To assume that every meditation master of the eighth century was a "Zennist" in the sense used later is unsafe, especially when even a monk who both wrote on poetry and associated himself with a lineage of Chan practitioners might also have other simultaneous interests, such as the study of Buddhist discipline (Nielson, 1972: 56). Describing any poetry written before a broader conception of what constituted the Chan tradition arose as in any sense "Zen" also seems problematic. Thus Nicholas Morrow Williams accepts the point of Jia Jinhua 賈晉華 that influence more likely flowed from an early eighth century poet to the reforming Chan masters of later in the century, but feels that it is still legitimate to discuss the former in terms of a Zen poetic, just as it is a valid hermeneutical venture to discuss a play by Shakespeare in Freudian terms (Williams, 2017: 34). True, but we are in a position to appreciate that, be it indirectly or by direct reading, Freud was for his part also a Shakespearian; until Jia's point is more widely understood such ventures tend to risk confusion.

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<sup>1</sup> I was able to attend an earlier lecture in which Eric Greene outlined his findings on the question of how meditation was actually held to work in medieval China (see Greene, 2016), and the conception of meditation incorporated into my remarks doubtless reflect that influence, especially since I have no experience of meditation myself.



In fact, there is at least one indication that, as the Chan tradition sought to define itself as a broad movement in the ninth century, it did try to incorporate at least one earlier poet, Wang Fanzhi 王梵志 (birth and death dates unknown) (Broughton, 2009: 177). But in the long run this numinous yet decidedly inelegant folk versifier proved too marginal to represent the Chan movement's literary ideals, and instead the more appropriate figure of Hanshan 寒山 was eventually co-opted to serve in the role of Zen poet. Even then it seems more likely that Zen underwent a touch of Hanshan than that the reverse happened (Hobson, 2003: 136). Rather than engage this broader but problematic field at all, the following remarks concentrate instead on the appearance of implicit and eventually explicit commendations of meditation as an aid to poetic composition, while acknowledging that though the relevant terminology was widespread enough to be seen as neither abstrusely technical nor as associated with only one school within East Asian Buddhism, the development within the unfolding of Tang literary history took place in the same context in which Chan Buddhism was also taking shape.

The following remarks, then, are simply designed to stimulate reflection and discussion rather than to provide a definitive solution to any research problem.

The idea in question here is that Buddhism, especially (even if not straightforwardly) of the type we now call "Zen," after its Japanese pronunciation, influenced the ways of looking at and discussing poetry that emerged in China in the eighth century. This influence seems to have been particularly strong in drawing attention to the visual aspects of poetry, and that is why the English term "Imagism" was initially deployed above in the title, rather than because of any particularly close analogy, let alone because of any as-yet-unverifiable direct historical link. But in so far as may be judged from our current state of knowledge, an indirect link, through Chinese influences on Japanese conceptions of poetic writing, and thence on through early Western ventures in writing new forms of poetry, is entirely possible.

Narratives of the history of Imagism in English-language poetry are numerous, but all are generally agreed on the key role of the aforementioned Ezra Pound, in part through his editorial promotion of others, but also in part thanks to his fourteen-word poem "In a Station of the Metro" (1911), which took him a solid year to write, as he pared it down and pared it down to its central image (Kenner, 1971: 184–7). Imagism as a movement came and went, but after the immense effort poured into this tiny poem the English poetic tradition was never the same again. Yet while one should not discount the classical influences exerted on Pound, and even more on his friends, the consensus seems to be that East Asian models certainly played a role in stimulating the emergence of Imagism, specifically the Japanese form that we now call the haiku. Therefore, despite Pound's well-known interest in Chinese poetry, any credit that China might claim for this breakthrough can only be accounted for as indirect, in that great haiku masters, such as Matsuo Bashō 松尾芭蕉 (1644–1694), were demonstrably admirers of Chinese literary culture (Qiu, 2005). On the other hand, the models long known in Japan of Tang verse, and the language in which their composition was discussed, can arguably be placed quite firmly in the remoter ancestry of Pound's great discovery, as we shall have occasion to note below. And what needs to be stressed is that for all Pound's

infatuation with Confucianism, that language was most certainly in no small part originally Buddhist.

This fact in itself is no news at all. In James J. Y. Liu’s classic, pioneering study, *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, long a staple of Chinese studies reading lists, he already noted that one of his own key terms, *jingjie* 境界, which he uses in the sense of the “world” created by a poet, derives proximately from Wang Guowei 王国维 (1877–1927), but also that originally it rendered into Chinese the Sanskrit term *viśaya*, meaning in Buddhist thought “sphere” or “spiritual domain” (Liu, 1962: 84, 91–100). The choice of alternative renderings here is no accident: by the end of the discussion here the reader will have about a couple of dozen or so different translations to choose from; to labour this point I have made no attempt to impose any unifying terminology of my own. Originally, no doubt, matters were fairly unambiguous: in pre-imperial China the expression meant a boundary, and hence as a first step its semantic range came to be extended quite naturally to indicate “territory.”<sup>2</sup> In Buddhist translations that extended meaning became more abstract, so that *feiwo jingjie* 非我境界 in the *Longer Pure Land Sutra* has been rendered into English as “not within the range of my abilities” (Gómez, 1996: 164).<sup>3</sup> But this type of usage meant that the original compound term was further pressed into service – most often in the abbreviated form of *jing* 境 alone – to express *viśaya*, used technically to represent the philosophical concept of “sensory object,” to adopt one of the dozen translations used by Dan Lusthaus in rendering this evidently somewhat tricky element in Buddhist thought (2002: 55).<sup>4</sup> His suggested philosophical renderings are by no means comprehensive: D. T. Suzuki offers for *jingjie* “individuation, external world, world of particulars,” and no doubt even within a narrowly philosophical context the list could be further extended (Suzuki, 1930: 443). To make matters worse, a comprehensive list of all the Sanskrit equivalents that may lie behind *jing* and *jingjie* runs to 27 items in each case (Hirakawa, 1997: 302). The development towards the deployment of *jing* in philosophical writing was not solely Buddhist, since for example the Guo Xiang 郭象 commentary on *Zhuangzi* 庄子 of 300 CE already speaks of *shi fei zhi jing* 是非之境, the “realm of right and wrong,” and the like (Guo, 1961: 1A:102). But its involvement in discussion of matters of cognition does seem to be a characteristic of its use in translated Buddhist texts.

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<sup>2</sup> Zhang Hua 張華 (232–300) demonstrates the ambiguity of the expression when he says, with regard to early China up to the end of the Spring and Autumn period, that *zhuguo jingjie*, *quanyaxiangru* 諸國境界，犬牙相入, for while the “boundaries of the kingdoms” can be said cartographically to have “intercut like [a row of] dog’s teeth,” it is in fact the territories that they bounded that did so (Fan, 1980: 1:7). Greatrex (1987: 71) translates judiciously as: “The territories and borders of the various states are as interlocked as a dog’s teeth”; there is more in his n.6, p. 184 on the dog’s teeth metaphor.

<sup>3</sup> For a translation of the equivalent Sanskrit as “I am not capable of understanding this wondrous array on my own,” see Gómez (1996: 68).

<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere Lusthaus’ translations of the term range across “circumstances” (2002: 1), “sensed-object” (2002: 121), “objects” (2002: 282), “cognitive object” (2002: 313, n.66), “sense-objects” (2002: 335), “external perceptual fields” (2002: 438), “perceptual field” or “perceptual object” (2002: 445, n.28), “cognitive object” (2002: 454), “mental objects” (2002: 460), and, finally, simply “things” (2002: 474).

How could such a word end up as a literary term? Surely it could only have been a somewhat arbitrary borrowing whose meaning in poetry criticism can only be derived from the context in which it is used, without undue reference to its origins? Surely Tang poets were much more concerned with heavy drinking than mastering the intricacies of Buddhist phenomenology? For such, it seems to me, is rather the line taken in the most succinct and clear account in English of the introduction of the concept outlined by James Liu into the history of literary criticism in China. This may be found in a study by Yang Jingqing. The purpose of Yang's work is to question the common assumption that the poetry of Wang Wei 王维 (699–759) embodies the insights of Zen, or rather (to revert at this point the more appropriate Chinese pronunciation) Chan. This is certainly an argument well worth making: the word "Chan," as already noted, originally signified no more than "meditation," and though in the early eighth century many meditators had taken the first step towards forming a distinctive tradition by tracing their spiritual genealogy to the sixth century Indian patriarch Bodhidharma, there is no sign that they conceived of themselves and their particular groups as belonging to any overarching and distinctive school of Chinese Buddhism. Indeed, even in the ninth century one finds that the notion of a "Chan school" could still find room for meditators practising methods associated with the Tiantai 天台 tradition that had been formulated in the early seventh century (Kamata, 1971: 48; Broughton, 2009: 110).<sup>5</sup> But while Yang's analysis gives due credit to Buddhist terms that had by Wang's time entered into discussions of Chinese literature, his aim is to stress the independence of poetic composition and Buddhist practice as two separate areas of endeavour. In challenging the details of Yang's account of Buddhism in relation to literary criticism there is no intention here of contradicting his overall thesis; it is simply that his concise summary affords a convenient starting point for the reconsideration of the role of a particular word in both Buddhist and literary thought and thereby illuminating the quest for an image as an aspect of Tang poetry.

The first passage Yang takes up concerning *jing* in relation to Wang Wei is one from the *Shige* 诗格, a work on poetics attributed to his contemporary and friend Wang Changling 王昌龄 (c. 698–755), a poet whose writing in the opinion of one later critic, Shi Buhua 施补华 (1835–1890), also exhibits a touch of Zen (Huang, 1981: 61). Striving for a fairly plain and literal version of this passage that avoids words such as "inspiration," entangling the Tang mind in too many European ideas, I would suggest for the quotation: "If the thought does not come, you must then let your feelings run free and let it be, so that a *jing* is born; only thereafter illumine them by means of the *jing*, then the thought will come, and then you compose your piece" 思若不來，即須放情却寬之，令境生。然后以境照之，思則便來，來即作文。 The translation for *jing* offered by Yang in his version of this passage is "scene" (Yang, 2007: 172). Wang Changling's authorship of these words seems much more certain than for other material allegedly from the *Shige* that has come down to us, and whoever wrote these words, they must be dated to the very early ninth century at the latest, since they are to be found in the *Bunkyō hifu ron* 文鏡秘府論, a guide to composition in Classical Chinese by a Japanese monk and visitor to China, Kūkai

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<sup>5</sup> Kamata here is reprinting Zongmi 宗密 (780–841), *Chanyuan zhuquan ji duxu* 禅源诸詮集都序 from a better edition than those used in standard canonical collections, such as Taishō Canon no. 2015, with annotation and a Japanese translation.

空海 (774–835) (1975: 129 [section *nan* 南]). The exact date of his compilation is unclear, but its first drafting appears to have been some time before 820; it is worth noting too that it remained a work of importance, read for example by the aforementioned Matsuo Bashō (Abé, 1999: 480, n.96). A second quotation in Kūkai’s guide from the same source on poetics takes a similar tack: “Whenever you make it your intention to write a poem you must first still your mind, and when the eye strikes on the right thing, then you must use your mind to strike it and deeply penetrate the *jing*” 夫置意作诗，即须凝心，目擊其物，便以心擊之，深穿其境. For this passage Yang cites a translation by Stephen Owen in which we find the rendering to be “world-scene [*jing*, perhaps ‘environment’]” (Kūkai, 1975: 129; Yang, 2007: 172; Owen, 1996: 123).

Yang’s account of the material associated with Wang Changling then cites the usage of *jing* to be found in a work of scholastic Buddhist philosophy, elucidated by means of a dictionary of Buddhist terminology, and while conceding that Wang does show some familiarity with Buddhism in some of his verses, Yang concludes that “these pieces of information are not enough to justify the assumption that Wang Changling, in the *Shige*, was talking about poetry from a Buddhist point of view or introducing Buddhist doctrines into poetics” (Yang, 2007: 173–4). He then turns to the monk-poet Jiaoran 皎然 (730–799) and his treatise on writing poetry, *Shishi* 诗式, which contains a section on “obtaining *jing*” *qujing* 取境 – in fact in his final section Jiaoran returns to this topic, making it clear that it is the key to poetic composition (Yang, 2007: 175–6; Jiaoran, 1981: 31, 35). Here Yang concludes that, “in spite of the possible Buddhist connotations of the term *jing*, Jiaoran uses it in a fully literary context to refer to some kind of imagery formed in the mind before it is put into verse” (Yang, 2007: 176).

There are, in my view, a number of reasons for thinking that the dichotomy between literary and Buddhist thought here is a little overdrawn. First, the term *jing* is not confined to learned treatises on Buddhist phenomenology, but also plays a significant part in works on meditation, including works on meditation designed for beginners, rather than for monkish virtuosi in this practice. A good example would be in the basic introductory manual used by the Tiantai school (a reference to whose practice of meditation has already been made above), a guide so popular that it has been frequently translated into European languages – the early (1938) English version cited here is entitled “Dhyana for Beginners,” though because it has been determined that the Chinese original has been modified since Tang times, reference is also made to a version of the text drawing on a critical edition established in Japan in 1954, and to a more recent translation by Bhikshu Dharmamitra that prints Chinese text on the facing page. Naturally, of course, tracing the translation of *jing* into English throughout such sources only serves to underline the problem of putting unfamiliar ideas into plain language.

Thus when we first encounter the statement in Goddard’s 1938 translation that “there are six aspects of behaviour,” as for example “regards eyes towards sights” and “ears towards sounds” and so forth, there is little indication that this list of six aspects begins in Chinese as 所言境者，谓六塵境; closer is Dharmamitra’s version: “As for what is referred to as ‘objective conditions’, it refers to six kinds of objective conditions” (Goddard, 1938: 469; Sekiguchi, 1974: 110; Dharmamitra, 2008:

117).<sup>6</sup> Later on, in discussing some of the hazards of meditation, the warning 或时见种种诸异境界 is rendered variously as “sometimes there will be strange changing conditions,” or “one might see all sorts of strange mental states” (Goddard, 1938: 481; Sekiguchi, 1974: 136; Dharmamitra, 2008: 149). “Conditions” generally seems to be the preferred way here of representing *jing* or *jingjie* when discussing the negative illusory images sometimes unleashed by meditation. Later in the text, however, *mojing* 魔境, which might be understood as the realm of Māra or delusion, becomes subsumed in the earlier English translation into the category “evil influences,” in a deliberate, openly acknowledged attempt on the part of the earlier translator at ensuring that the existence of an actual King of Evil and his demons is not affirmed; more recently the term has been rendered a degree more explicitly as “demon states” (Goddard, 1938: 483, 486; Sekiguchi, 1974: 152; Dharmamitra, 2008: 163). Yet whatever phraseology we choose from among the many European language translations of this opuscle to convey the experience of meditation in Sui–Tang times – and it would be possible to add substantially to the examples already given – it is important to see that *jing* was not a term confined to book learning, but one that might also be encountered within the everyday activity of achieving mental discipline.

Secondly, moreover, in that this activity was not confined to the Buddhist clergy, we find that the terms *jing* and *jingjie*, even if originally associated with distinctively Buddhist approaches to cognition, turn up outside specifically Buddhist sources as well. It has been observed more than once that the basic training manual here entitled “Dhyana for Beginners” exerted an influence not only on other Buddhist meditators but also on Daoists.<sup>7</sup> It is not surprising therefore to find that in the early eighth century Daoist text most closely allied to “Dhyana for Beginners” when it comes to discussing the interlinked notions of mind and of the “realm of delusion” the latter element is expressed with a rather similar term to *mojing*, namely *huanjing* 幻境, a compound which was in fact used by some Buddhist translators to render *Māya-viśaya* (Kohn, 1987: 87, and Chinese text 162.2a1; Suzuki, 1930: 317, 431). Elsewhere in the same work, where the relationship with mind is again discussed, *jing* alone is translated by one scholar of Daoism as “projected reality” (Kohn, 1987: 103, and Chinese text 166.11a.17–19). It is possible that the notion of projection may not be appropriate, since no such process would appear to be clearly envisaged in the text, but the translator is at any rate right to point out that Daoists had incorporated *jing* into their vocabulary in their own way in the preceding century – in their sources of that period it was rendered by Isabelle Robinet into French as “*objet*,” or (rendering a Chinese gloss in one influential Daoist treatise) “*le monde*” (Robinet, 1977: 245–6, 262–3). Another Daoist compendium of the same period contains no less than six passages discussing the relationship between the mind and *jing* (Zhu, 1989: 191–3). So, well before Kūkai, and even before Wang Changling, the deployment of this term was far from having been a Buddhist monopoly.

<sup>6</sup> The Chinese of the Dharmamitra translation is cross-referred to the electronic CBETA version of the Taisho Canon. Goddard did not know enough Chinese to translate by himself: the work was carried out by his friend the Chinese monk Waidao, acknowledged as “Bhikshu Wai-tao”: see Aitken (1996: 9 n.7).

<sup>7</sup> For influence on the Daoist text consulted here, see Kamitsuka (1982: 234–5) and now also Kohn (2015). For its influence on the Chan tradition, see Bielefeldt (1986: 133–4).

The third reason for seeing Buddhist and literary usage of the term *jing* as more overlapping than entirely separate is that eighth century Tang poets make use of it in their compositions. Of course, not every use of *jing* in poetry can be situated in the vocabulary of mental discipline discussed so far. When for example Wang Changling uses the phrase *renjing* 人境 in one of his poems dedicated to a Buddhist monk – a phrase also used more than once by Du Fu 杜甫 – it would plainly be wrong to understand this as “people considered as objects of cognition” (Huang, 1981: 52; Hiraoka, 1964: no. 06752). The phrase is simply taken from the opening line of the fifth in the Tao Qian 陶潜 (365–427) series on “Drinking Wine” *Yin Jiu* 饮酒 where – despite the efforts of later critics influenced by Jiaoran and his successors – the translation by Robert Kotewall and Norman L. Smith (for example) of 结庐在人境 as “I built my hut amid the throng of men” seems fair enough (Kotewall and Smith, 1962: 9; Gong, 1996: 219, 222). We might also disqualify a poem attributed to Dai Shulun 戴叔伦 (732–789) that uses the term *huanjing*, on the grounds that even if there is no doubt that it is a late eighth-century poem, it is also attributed to Qingjiang 清江 (?–?811), who was a monk poet who might therefore be expected to include some scriptural language in his verse (*Quan Tang shi*, 1960: 273:3091).<sup>8</sup> But what about Li Qi 李颀, whose dates are unknown, but who, since he passed the *jinshi* 进士 examinations of 735, must count as a secular literary figure? He has a poem on the new brickwork of a well in a Luoyang monastery, “Changshou si Can gong yuan xin zhou jing” 长寿寺絜公院新甃井, which contains the line “The *jingjie*, dependent on the mind, is pure” 境界因心净 (*Quan Tang shi*, 1960: 134:1366; Hiraoka, 1964: no. 06404).<sup>9</sup>

Such cases may not be common, but there is a fourth argument for considering the use of *jing* in the *Shige* description of poetic composition to be more closely linked to Buddhism than at first might appear to be the case, and that concerns the linguistic context in which occurrences of the word are situated in the text, which strongly suggest a connection with meditation. Mental discipline in Tang China did not have to be discussed in the terminology of a technical manual like “Dhyana for Beginners”, even if such works were not uncommon, but could in more literary contexts call on a very ancient vocabulary that raised no particular sectarian connotations. Wang Changling, for example, refers twice in his slim surviving corpus of poems to “fasting the mind” *zhaixin* 齋心, a classical description for mental discipline that we find by the early years of the ninth century accepted not only by Buddhists and Daoists but also by some who wished to assert a purely Confucian identity (Huang, 1981: 28, 80; Hiraoka, 1964: no. 06713 and 06816; Barrett, 1992: 113). Turning back to the early Japanese quotations of Wang’s *Shige* already cited above, the words *zhao* 照 (“illumine”), in the first passage and *ning* 凝 (“still,” or literally “freeze”), in the second both fall into this same category. Though it would take a much more extended essay to do them full justice, we may cite just one

<sup>8</sup> “Song che canjun Jiangling” 送車參軍江陵, poem no. 14407 in Hiraoka (1964), also included as no. 44328: the poem is already listed twice under the two names in the late tenth century *Wenyuan yinghua* 文苑英華, though whether the note there in printed editions pointing out the problem is attributable to the original editors I do not know – there are a couple of other Dai Shulun poems also attributed to Qingjiang in *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩.

<sup>9</sup> This poem was as far as I am aware first printed in movable type in the early-to-mid-sixteenth century; see *Tang wushi jia shiji* (1989: 151c).

example of a source that employs both words, the late eighth century *Baozang lun* 宝藏論, a Buddhist work that draws on Tang Daoist ideas, which uses *zhao* to affirm that spiritual power is “to illuminate things with a still mind” 静心照物, and uses *ning* to say that those who understand inherent transcendence “find stillness and quiescence in their present existence” 當體而凝寂 (Sharf, 2002: 33–6, 205, 220). The two characters also form part of the sixteen-character credo that, in the view of Hu Shi 胡适 (1891–1962), encapsulated the meditation techniques of the Northern School of Chan, at least as described in the writings of their rivals in the Southern School (Yanagida, 1975: 294; Hu, 1970: 287; Gernet, 1977: 93, 94 n.15). In the past it seems to have been assumed by many that such language in Tang poetry and literary criticism is merely decorative. This may not necessarily be the case, and some further consideration of this matter might be worthwhile.

But for the final argument for seeing the literary term *jing* as strongly linked to the Buddhist practice of meditation we must turn to an explicit statement on the matter from a contemporary of Kūkai whose significance for the history of East Asian literary thought has in the past been less appreciated, namely Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772–842). Recently, however, Anthony DeBlasi has translated a portion of an extended preface to a poem of parting written for a Buddhist monk-poet in which Liu makes clear his thoughts on the relationship between Buddhism and literature (DeBlasi, 2002: 107).<sup>10</sup> This opening passage of the preface explains that monks empty their hearts of desire, allowing “scenes” *jing* 景 (or in the version of the text cited here, “images” *xiang* 象) to enter, which spill out in words, which find literary form – such is the reason for the emergence of so many monk poets. But in next summarising this process, Liu then condenses the first part of his account into the succinct dictum 因定而得境 “through meditation they obtain *jing*” (*Quan Tang shi*, 1960: 357:4015; Hiraoka, 1964: no. 18758). This as a statement seems clear enough.

Exactly what it means, however, is quite another matter, as much part of the study of psychology as of literary history. One possible hint comes from another theme noticed by Stephen Owen in the material preserved by Kūkai, in which it is recommended that the poet seeking a poetic conception (*yi* 意) should try going to sleep (Owen, 1996: 111–12, 114).<sup>11</sup> This strongly suggests that what was valued as a result of this particular technique was what we now call hypnagogic experiences – and what meditation manuals like “Dhyana for Beginners” also offered was the experience of unbidden images. Otherwise, if the poet has to hunt through everyday reality for these things, they become, in the terminology of Stephen Owen’s discussion, “*trouvailles*”, or lucky finds – like Ezra Pound’s experience in the Paris Metro (Owen, 1996: 108, 111, 120–21). Such interruptions in the course of the mundane may indeed connect with another element in poetic composition to which a glancing allusion has already been made above: if many of the poems of parting that bulk out the Tang literary heritage were written when drunk, then we should recall that it was a level of inebriation that James Liu – before he came to consider

<sup>10</sup> DeBlasi here is concerned not with poetic creativity, but rather with the moral problem of detachment, though the two in Liu’s mind seem to have been interconnected.

<sup>11</sup> It goes without saying that this was not a specifically Buddhist practice; it does however give us a clue as to what was appreciated in Buddhist practice also.

the phrase a little too precious – was disposed to translate as “rapture with wine” (Liu, 1962: 58–60).

The predominance of this particular form of rapture, of course, posed a problem for the monk poet, to whom it was taboo: “rapture with tea” does not sound quite so alluring, though there is every sign that the Buddhists did their best to draw attention to its rival attractions.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, to promote meditation as an adjunct to creativity looks more like a natural development of existing trends. Buddhism in all its forms emphasises aspects of cognition, so that there is substantial evidence that by the sixth century CE in China it was influencing the way that poets looked at the world (Tian, 2007: 211–59). This is not to deny that the adjunct to creativity provided by religious practice was seen by lay poets at least as anything other than a borrowing from another field of experience: Liu Yuxi, at any rate, speaks elsewhere of poetic exaltation and Buddhist enlightenment as two separate, antithetical things; similarly for his friend Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846) meditation and drinking are also seen as antithetical.<sup>13</sup> In a couplet of obscure derivation attributed to the late Tang poet Zhou Pu 周朴 (d. 879) in praise of the famous Chan master Lingyou 靈祐 (771–853), he describes the master as a meditator, himself as a poet and the Tang emperor as a third among individuals unique in their respective roles, suggesting again a conceptualisation of meditation and poetry as co-equal domains (*Quan Tang shi*, 1960: 673:7704).<sup>14</sup>

Such evidence thus suggests that we should be cautious not to ascribe anything more than a touch of Zen to late Tang poets – and quite possibly many of them remained entirely untouched at that. But the evidence does show something else at the same time. The interest of poets in meditation formed a significant part of a broader curiosity about the origin of unbidden images within the mentality of perception that caused them to reflect upon and to discuss the topic. In that sense it may be said with only a little exaggeration that the poets of the age were all imagists, and that the later tradition in East Asia continued to bear the imprint of their preoccupations.

For the English-language poetic tradition the groundbreaking work of Ezra Pound certainly serves as a point of comparison. Whether Pound also represents a point of contact is less clear, though since his epiphany took place in Paris a full examination of that topic would no doubt lead into the investigation of possible

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<sup>12</sup> This is now extensively documented in Benn (2015); in particular p. 69 includes the phrase “drunk on tea” in relation to artistic creativity in a non-Buddhist context, and see also his p. 84 for the poem by Liu Yuxi prefaced by the remarks on meditation and *jing* discussed above.

<sup>13</sup> See, respectively, “Chou letian zuihou kuangyin shiyun” 酬乐天醉后狂吟十韵 in which we find these lines: 诗家登逸品，释氏悟真筌 (*Quan Tang shi*, 1960: 362:4093; Hiraoka, 1964: no. 19125); and “He zhifei” 和知非 in which we find the following: 禅能泯人我，醉可忘荣悴 (*Quan Tang shi*, 1960: 445:4987; Hiraoka, 1964: no. 23208).

<sup>14</sup> 禅是大滬诗是朴，大唐天子只三人. Although in *Quan Tang shi* (1960: 673:7696) we find another poem dedicated to Lingyu (Hiraoka, 1964: no. 37192), the attribution of which to Zhou is already attested in the tenth century, how this random couplet came to be preserved, attached with others to his surviving works, is unknown to me. By this point, as one reader of an earlier version of this piece has pertinently noted, the picture of Buddhism and Tang poetics is complicated by the influence of the ex-monk Jia Dao 贾岛 (779–843), though his later impact in Japan was perhaps limited – the whole question is too complex to consider here.



French intermediaries, such as Marquis D’Hervey-Saint-Denys (1822–1892), pioneer onirologist and translator of Tang poetry, or Paul-Louis Couchoud (1879–1959), an early translator of haiku.<sup>15</sup> Even in the twenty-first century the probable French background to the achievement embodied in “In a Station of the Metro” still seems not to have attracted the attention of Anglophone writers on Pound, despite the fact that even the most preliminary survey of the spread of an awareness of haiku lists several French studies and translations of this type of poem that antedate Pound’s 1911 composition (Brower, 1972: 109–113).<sup>16</sup> Most interestingly, Angus Graham, who had argued strongly for Japanese influences on Imagism in his original *Poems of the Late T’ang*, and mentions the work of Couchoud, in returning to the question once more in the “Additional Preface” to his Penguin republication in 1977, points to fresh research that had pushed back an explicit admiration for Japanese poetry acknowledged by the eventual imagist and student of French poetry F. S. Flint (1885–1960) as early as 1908 (Graham, 2008: 12, 16).

But whatever the precise connection, Pound’s notion of the “image,” while no doubt encouraging translators to ignore the formal sophistication of Tang verse, did at last allow the Chinese tradition to speak to the reader of English in a way that by the late nineteenth century the Japanese tradition was also doing. A frog jumping into a pond, or better still, a great wave breaking at its crest – these images speak across cultures with an immediacy that overcomes linguistic barriers for the reasons explored above: we should not be surprised if such possibilities for transcultural communication lie, too, within the legacy of the Tang poets.

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<sup>15</sup> The only study I have seen on the marquis as translator, Pino and Rabut (1999), does not concern his poetry; Kenner (1971: 184) mentions Pound’s acknowledgment of Japanese influence but does not explore the matter. We should perhaps also bear in mind possible direct Chinese influence from the translation work of Judith Gautier (1845–1917), for whom see Yu (2007).

<sup>16</sup> Nader (2015: 11–22), in exploring Pound’s knowledge of China as accumulated in the USA and London prior to his introduction to the work of Ernest Fenollosa in 1913, on p. 16 notes that he was reading Confucian texts in French, but does not mention Japanese literature.

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**A Forgotten Experiment: Constitutional Democratisation in Early Twentieth Century China (1909–14)**

Quan YAN

Ernest Ming-tak Leung



*Opening of the first parliamentary session, Peking, April 8, 1913*

**Abstract**

*This paper is an account of China's brief experiment with constitutional democracy and representative government during the early 20th century, spanning the late Qing Empire and the early Republic. The setting-up in 1909 of elected Provincial Consultative Boards was followed by the establishment in 1910 of the half-elected, half-appointed Advisory Council in Peking. This provided a battleground between the imperial court and the parliamentarians. Events such as the impeachment of the Grand Councillor were unprecedented and provided Chinese society and its elected representatives desperately needed training in modern parliamentary struggle. Councillors disillusioned with Manchu promises of reform became major promoters of the Republican revolution. Yet the early Republican parliament, dominated by radical revolutionaries whose idealism and all-or-nothing moral code rejected all compromise as betrayal, refused to acknowledge President Yuan Shikai's actual strength and denied themselves a chance of arriving at a constitutional settlement with him. Exasperated by radical obstinance and unable to count on support from a strong centrist parliamentary force, Yuan in turn overreacted by dismantling the democratic institutions and installing a Latin American-styled "Super Presidency". Establishmentarian and revolutionary elite loss of faith in moderation or accommodation ultimately pushed China away from democracy and onto a course towards totalitarianism.*

**Key words:** *democracy, early Republic, constitutionalism, Beiyang, representative government, late-Qing reforms*

In 1909–14, China attempted a transition to democratic representative government. During the last years of the Qing Empire, the Manchu imperial government partially satisfied demands for a constitutional monarchy, as opposed to outright revolution, by setting up a provisional parliament in the form of an Advisory Council (*zizhengyuan* 資政院) together with Provincial Consultative Assemblies (*sheng xunyiju* 省諮議局). This was the first test bed for Chinese parliamentarianism. It was this that opened the floodgates of revolutionary change to the political system and accelerated the transformation of traditional socio-political modes of behaviour. When the Republican Revolution happened in October 1911, it was partially helped by constitutionalist members of the Advisory Council who were disgruntled by official apathy and sluggish progress towards establishing a formal parliamentary form of government. With the establishment, on January 1, 1912, of the Republic of China, the difficult process of drafting and promulgating a constitution for the Republic that was agreeable to all parties began. By 1913 constitution-makers were trapped between opposite ends of the political spectrum. These were, firstly, the uncompromising radical wing of the Kuomintang (KMT, or “Nationalist Party”), and, secondly, the “Beiyang” (北洋 “North Sea”)<sup>1</sup> military-bureaucratic bloc, which, rather than being a force of pure reaction, were in fact leaders of the late Qing modernisation effort and had played an important role in fostering a smooth transition to the Republic. Both increasingly harboured a winner-take-all mentality, favouring autocracy and eliminating the other party as soon as an accommodation could not be reached. It was however precisely during these tumultuous years, known as the “Beiyang period” of the Republic, that the pace of change was quickest in terms of political authority, legitimacy, participation, and journalistic freedom, with the commencement of competitive parliamentary elections and universal acknowledgment of the need for and the legitimacy of a constitution. As Joseph Levenson said, “The monarchical symbols were just as thoroughly drained, and this in itself reminds us that the new form of republican China was not only form but content” (Levenson, 1964: 124).

China’s constitutional democratisation was simultaneous to those which were under way in the Ottoman Empire, Persia, Portugal, Mexico, and Japan, and was one case in a global trend of political reform that began before the First World War. Democratic transitions require constitution-making, where elites decide the limits and powers of the new regime and the citizens (Bonime-Blanc, 1987: 13). This is followed by measures to prevent the new democratic order from being usurped by elements of the *ancien régime* or by radicals seeking extraordinary powers to cleanse the former. As such the political transition is inherently fragile, being “a period of great political uncertainty ... subject to unforeseen contingencies, unfolding processes and unintended outcomes [where] actors are often forced into making hurried and confused choices; and the alliances they enter are usually fleeting and opportunistic. The result of these interactions is often not what any one group preferred initially” (Karl and Schmitter, 1991: 270).

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<sup>1</sup> Apart from commonly used transliterations (e.g. Sun Yat-sen) and well-known names of cities (e.g. Peking, Nanking, Tientsin) which when rendered in non-contemporary spellings (e.g. Beijing, Nanjing, Tianjin) would be anachronous, all transliterations are given in Hanyu pinyin.

For years, research on constitutionalism and democratisation in early twentieth-century China has focused either on the 1912 “Provisional Constitution” (Yang, 1998) or on inter-party bickering (Chang, 2004). Most over-emphasise the macro-narrative (e.g. Xiao, 1999) at the cost of micro-analysis, such as elite political choices, comparative analysis of constitutional systems, and institutional structures. From the methodological perspective, the representative works have mostly been historical (Liu, 1996; Hou, 2011; etc.) and ignore the social scientific possibilities of using comparative and multi-disciplinary methods.

Facile narratives on Chinese democratisation and methodological parochialism are obstacles to deepening our comprehension of the real causes of the failure of the democratic experiment. Was it really, as many Chinese scholars have claimed, that Chinese conditions were inherently incompatible with Western democracy? Or was it, as some Western scholars have claimed, that the Chinese were unused to life without political authority, thus descending easily into selfish factional bickering (Nathan, 1976). We think the more important question is whether a democratic transition under constitutional republicanism ever stood a chance in China, and how one should act should the chance ever come again. From our past experience, can useful lessons be learnt in the choice of constitutional systems and the arrangement of the transition itself, particularly where it concerns a mode of political behaviour most suited to the fickle political realities of a future Chinese political transition? All of these suggest that a re-examination of the constitutional democratic transition in early twentieth-century China is necessary and long overdue.

This paper will show that the extent and depth of change during China’s 1909–14 constitutional democratic transition surpassed widely-held assumptions, encompassing changes in institutions, social norms, and modes of thinking. It will also show that the early Republic’s quick pace of democratisation was thanks in part to the preparation begun during the late Qing parliamentary experiment. This paper is also an attempt at multi-disciplinary analysis, involving history and political science, of the factors that led to the breakdown of China’s 1909–14 democratic transition, and to point out what lessons can be learnt from it.

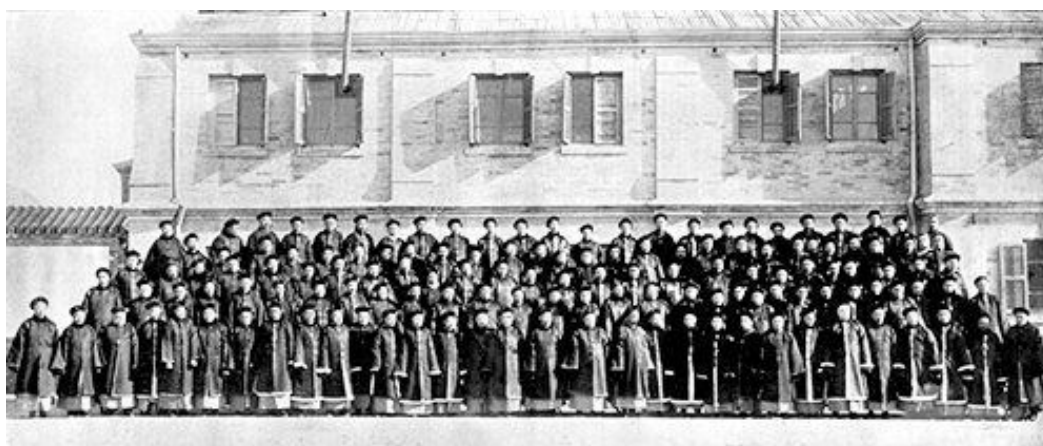
Previous research has been constrained by structuralist presumptions particularly with regard to the so-called “conservative” actors, who were assumed to be acting on the basis of factors such as traditional culture. This paper makes use instead of “neo-institutionalist” analytical methods and assumes the outcome to be the result of rational choices on the part of all historical actors involved. By that we mean the following: “Different subjects of action (individuals, organisations, or the government) may have different motives, modes of behaviour, and results in promoting institutional change, but they must obey the general principles and processes of institutional change. The balance between the costs and benefits of institution change is critical to the promotion of or delay to institutional change. Only when the expected benefits are higher than the expected costs would the subject of action promote institutional change until it is eventually materialised; the contrary is also true. This is the guiding principle behind institutional change” (Chen, 1994: 7).

In comparing the changes in the balance of political cost and benefit before and after choices were made in constitutional systems, this paper can shed light on

the correlation between constitutional design and the expectations by political actors on their future political outlook. Neo-institutionalist analysis is beneficial to understanding how constitutional design is related to political stability. This paper will demonstrate that the transition broke down due not to any significant suppressive behaviour on the part of “traditionalist reaction”, but due to the inability of parliamentary radicals to come to terms with the legitimacy of these institutional forces and vested interests. Such radicalism had in fact been begun by the “moderates” in the Advisory Council. This paper concludes by suggesting that in a political transition for an autocracy such as imperial China, if social revolution was not on the agenda, then respect should be given to the rightful place of vested interests in any future political arrangement. Political realism and a spirit of compromise, lacking in China’s 1909–14 episode, should be central to any successful democratic transition. These are essential to consolidating a constitutional order agreeable to all parties; all adjustments and fine-tuning can come afterwards, instead of endangering the transition itself.

In section one we explain the origins of the political transition in the activities of the late Qing Advisory Council, where popularly elected MPs fought to expand parliamentary rights and tried to promote the consolidation of a constitutional monarchy. Their failure contributed to the 1911 Republican Revolution, after which the democratic transition began in earnest, as outlined in section two. In the year 1913, known as the “sacred era” for parliament, Chinese political behaviour was reinvented, and this is explained in section three. In section four we deal with how radicalism in constitution-drafting destroyed the possibilities of a consensus between the KMT and the bureaucratic establishment, resulting in Yuan Shikai’s clampdown and the failure of the democratic transition. We finish by inspecting this outcome in an international comparative context in section five.

### **Parliamentary Politics in the Late Qing Empire**



*The Advisory Council, Peking, 1910.*

Parliamentary politics in China made its debut under the auspices of the Qing Empire. The Advisory Council (often mistranslated as “National Assembly”) was established on September 23, 1910 and served as the laboratory of a new mode of political behaviour. The September 1909 Advisory Council Charter (*zizhengyuan yuanzhang* 資政院院章)



set forth a mission to “make decisions according to the public will, and to provide the basis for the future establishment of a bicameral parliament” (“Memorial on the Draft Charter Submitted by the Advisory Council”; in Lai, 2004: 82). Its members had three-year terms and numbered 200, half of them chosen by the imperial court consisting of elite bureaucrats and aristocrats, and the other half chosen by the democratically but indirectly elected Provincial Consultative Assemblies, which had also been established in September 1909.<sup>2</sup> Council members drew lots to decide which subcommittee they joined. Members enjoyed the usual parliamentary privileges of being exempt from arrest, subject to conditions, and freedom of speech during council sessions.

The activities of the Advisory Council soon grew out of the “advisory” role to which it was initially assigned and assumed the guise of a de facto parliament. In the first normal session from September 1910 to January 1911, it was dominated by the elected half of the councillors, who mediated on conflicts between provincial authorities and assemblies, and sent dozens of questionnaires to government departments concerning the 1911 budget. They impeached the grand councillor (*junji dachen* 軍機大臣), and a proposed amnesty for political prisoners. During the second normal session started October 23, 1911, the council’s most prominent achievements were preparatory discussions on the drafting of the constitution, which culminated in the promulgation of the “Nineteen Supreme Principles of the Constitution” (*xianfa zhongda xintiao shijiutiao* 憲法重大信條十九條), the Parliament Organisation Act, and election laws. Legislation passed by the Advisory Council also included the Local Education Charter, the New Penal Code, the Copyright Act, the Press Act, and the Societies and Assemblies Act. Six reformists executed after the failure of the 1898 Reforms were rehabilitated, and a general amnesty was offered to political fugitives.<sup>3</sup>

The Advisory Council fought and won budgetary powers. The imperial court was forced by the council to submit the proposed budget for debate, a totally unprecedented event in Chinese history. The councillors carefully scrutinised every detail in the budget, which they slashed from 376.35 million silver taels to 77.9 million, producing even a slight margin of profit for the state. The council also went beyond the powers stipulated in its charter and impeached the grand councillor.

The Advisory Council Charter originally stated that if the grand councillor or any minister of state were to breach the law or infringe upon the rights of the council,

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<sup>2</sup> These councillors were not chosen democratically, but they were meant to be representative. Eight election charters existed in a semi-corporatist arrangement for various types of aristocrats and bureaucrats plus ten seats for major taxpayers. There were differences even amongst the methods by which the councillors were chosen. Some were merely hand-picked, others were elected amongst themselves before being appointed by the government. Councillors from Provincial Consultative Assemblies had to be ratified by the provincial governor or viceroy. Unique to China was the provision that the President of the Council (*zongcai* 總裁) was chosen not by the councillors, but by the emperor. The Advisory Council initially had two presidents representing the Manchu nobility and the imperial bureaucracy, respectively. It later settled on one president and one vice-president.

<sup>3</sup> Legislation was also passed on unifying the state treasury accounts, the colonisation of Heilongjiang, border administration reform, the nationalisation of Kaiping mine assets, reductions to the inter-provincial transit duties and a rise in taxes, and reforming the administration of the Zhejiang [Chekiang] Railway Company on the basis of the Commercial Code.

the council could report the facts to the imperial court and request an imperial verdict (Lai, 2017: 313). In 1910 the Advisory Council submitted a petition to the imperial court regarding the sale of government bonds in Hunan province, judging that since Governor Yang Wending 楊文鼎 had not sought permission from the Hunan Provincial Consultative Assembly, this amounted to an illegal act. The council decreed that the matter be re-submitted for approval by the Hunan Assembly, and that the relevant bureaucrats be sanctioned. The grand councillor, however, co-signed an edict which defended Governor Yang. Some councillors deemed that, since the Provincial Consultative Assembly Charter was national law, the grand councillor's co-signature was also an illegal imposition of an executive decree and were worried that this would have grave consequences for China's constitutionalism (see the minutes of the Advisory Council in Li, 2001: 141). To make things worse, the grand councillor sent the Advisory Council a muddled response,<sup>4</sup> and co-signed the prince regent's edicts delegating other matters submitted by the council to the decision of relevant government departments. This infuriated the councillors, who claimed that the grand councillor had infringed upon the rights of the council and was "unsuited to assist His Majesty the Emperor" (Li, 2001: 242, 253). The motion to impeach the grand councillor was passed, in an unprecedented show of check-and-balancing power.

The Advisory Council's bitter experience with balancing the imperial executive and lack of progress in promoting a transition of power paved the way for their participation in the Republican Revolution. On January 1, 1912, the Provisional Government of the Republic of China was established, and Dr Sun Yat-sen assumed its presidency in Nanking. Shortly afterwards a consensus between the warring northern and southern parties was reached. At this critical juncture the Beiyang military-bureaucratic establishment threw its weight behind the revolutionary cause and a joint petition of 47 leading generals requesting the emperor's abdication, forced the imperial court to submit to their pressure. The new prime minister elected by the Advisory Council, Beiyang military strongman Yuan Shikai, forced the young and hapless Emperor Puyi to abdicate and to transfer his powers to the new republic. Many councillors chosen by the Provincial Consultative Assemblies had submitted in 1910 four petitions to the imperial court asking for a formal parliament to be convened, but all were rejected, leaving many councillors distraught and sympathetic to the revolutionary cause. They left Peking to join the Provisional Republican Senate in Nanking, thus signifying strong continuity between the legislatures of the Qing Empire and the revolutionary republic. A quorum could no longer be maintained. In early February 1912, the new council president, Xu Dinglin 許鼎霖, having understood that the emperor's abdication was unavoidable, requested the imperial court to dissolve the Advisory Council.

What is clear from the experience of the Advisory Council is that the uncompromising mentality typical of the republican parliament had begun to surface in the last years of the Qing Empire, especially when the councillors deemed that their powers had been quietly usurped. In turn the resistance put up by these comparatively

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<sup>4</sup> The grand councillor, in his response to the Advisory Council, wrote that he had co-signed the edict under powers conferred by a law from the time of Emperor Qianlong (1711–1799), and that it had a different meaning to a Prime Minister's signature as in foreign governments. The grand councillor was unable to state clearly whether he must bear responsibility for the edict.

moderate politicians vastly exceeded the provisions of the council charter. The dissolution of the empire became a joint effort between the rebelling revolutionaries and the northern military-bureaucratic bloc, and even the parliamentary establishment, which saw greater political prospects for itself by kick-starting a proper democratic transition. As we shall see, the establishment would later come to be disillusioned with democratisation, but not with the republican form of government itself; nor did most of the establishment regret the earlier decision to overthrow the empire. Democratisation would be strangled it in its cradle, and an authoritarian republic would emerge in its place.

### **The Democratic Transition in the Early Chinese Republic**

During the process of the democratic transition, the most apparent changes were in the disintegration of monolithic executive power, followed by the emergence of a power structure based on the three branches of government – legislature, executive, and judiciary. In 1911–12, the Provisional Senate was established first in Nanking, and later in Peking, signifying the appearance in a China of a legislature in the full sense of the word. The Provisional Senate in Nanking opened on February 28, 1912 and had 42 senators representing 17 provinces and regions. They were appointed by the provincial governors who had declared independence from the Qing Empire during the revolution of 1911. The Nanking Provisional Senate proclaimed itself as the central legislative organ, and announced that “before parliament is convened, this senate would serve as the sole legislature” (“Bill of the Organisation Law of the Provisional Government of the Republic of China, February 1, 1912”; in Li, 2011: 529).



*The Provisional Senate at the inauguration of the Republic of China, January 1, 1912*

The most important product of the Nanking Provisional Senate was the drafting of the “Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China” which was promulgated on March 12, 1912, “distinguishing and defining the legislative, judiciary and executive powers”. Ironically the senate’s newly born independence was defined against the will of the executive branch of the revolutionary regime. Despite revolutionary leader Huang Xing’s threat to send troops to pressure the senate into not changing the capital (from Nanking, favoured by revolutionary leaders such as himself and Sun Yat-sen, to Peking,

favoured by Yuan Shikai and other revolutionaries such as Song Jiaoren; see Bergère, 1998: 221–222), the Senate ultimately ignored opposition from the Provisional Republican Government and exercised its independent legislative powers on matters regarding the choice of national capital city and the power to draft and implement the constitution.

The Provisional Senate existed only for a little more than two months, and its government-appointed nature meant a weak popular mandate. Upon protest by Provincial Assemblies such as that of Hubei, fresh elections were held for the Provisional Senate once a settlement had been reached by the warring northern and southern parties. On April 29, 1912, a new Provisional Senate was established in Peking, with 122 senators representing the nation. This body was active for almost a year. The president of the Provisional Senate, Wu Jinglian 吳景濂, said at the closing ceremony that “given some 220 meetings were held and some 230 motions voted on, these have laid the first foundations [of constitutional democracy]” (Sun, 1929: 114).

Preparatory work for electing the first parliament of the new republic began during the second half of 1912. On August 21 Yuan Shikai decreed for the first parliamentary elections to be held, announcing that “This formal parliament serves as the basis for the construction of the republic, and the sooner parliament is established, the sooner will our national foundations be settled. Since these elections are an urgent matter, work must proceed at an accelerated pace” (“Decree from Provisional President Yuan Shikai Regarding the Holding of Parliamentary Elections”; in SHAC, 2010: 120) On September 5 the dates of the elections to the House of Representatives were announced by the Peking Republican Government. The first round would be held on December 10, 1912 and the second round on January 10, 1913. On December 8 the dates of the elections to the senate were announced. Provincial Assemblies, the Central Academy, and the Overseas Chinese Electoral College would hold their elections on February 10, 1913, and Electoral Colleges representing Outer Mongolia, Tibet, and Qinghai would hold their elections on January 20, 1913 (Xie, 1948: 77–78). The elections were completed by March 1913. Under the coordination of the Peking government, intense preparatory work was carried out for the upcoming elections. The quality of the electoral contestation however left much to be desired, with “empty and shallow” manifestoes and ad hominem attacks. The intensity of the contestation was also uneven, with those in coastal regions being much more passionate than those in inland provinces (Zhang, P., 1986b: 10). There were however many positive points regarding this first election. The extent of activism and organisation was unprecedented:

Candidates set up night schools to teach voters how to write the candidates’ name, and they printed name cards which would be carried into the voting booths by the voters to allow the name to be copied onto the ballot. The candidates printed posters and banners to attract the attention of voters, or published their political views and the qualifications of their parties’ candidates on journals. The candidates travelled everywhere to make speeches. They offered privileges (such as exemption from party fees) to attract first round election candidates to join their own parties (Xu, 1977: 88–104).

There was a massive expansion of political participation. Firstly, more social strata were allowed to participate in the political process. Judging from the stipulations of the electoral laws and the social composition of elected MPs, the electorate consisted mainly of the gentry, industrial and financial capitalists, educators, journalists, small property owners, mid-to-lower-ranking bureaucrats, rural landowners, and rich peasants. The most active participants were the newly emerged stratum of city dwellers, or, we might say, a new social elite consisting of the urban middle class. The circumstances in China were akin to elections in the United States before 1820, where electoral rights belonged to only one section of the populace, or the owners of real estate (Bryce, 1921: 47).

Secondly, the intensity of political participation deepened. There was a steep increase in the electorate during the early years of the Republic compared to the late Qing elections. Due to relaxed restrictions on voting qualifications, an average of 1.5 million people per province, or 34 million people nationwide, were allowed to vote. This amounted to 10 percent of the Chinese population at the time (Zhang, P., 1986b: 10). This was in no way inferior to the depth of political participation in Europe or the United States during the early years of democratisation. Even after the 1832 electoral reforms which doubled the British electorate, it comprised of a mere 8 percent of the adult male population (Li, 2001: 173). Voting rights in Britain were still denied to more than half of the adult male population, and all women after the 1867 parliamentary reforms (Yan, 1999: 340). The electorate in the United States in 1840 consisted of only 16 percent of the total population (Huntington, 1996a: 94). The colonial Indian electorate, only one million in 1921, would not reach 1912 Chinese levels until 1935 (Fincher, 1981: 270–271). Voters in some areas of China were very active; 60 percent of them voted in Mukden (now Shenyang) – a railway junction and a major industrial centre in southern Manchuria – and 70 percent voted Jiangning prefecture in Jiangsu province, close to Nanking (Zhang, P., 1986a). NGOs and volunteers also helped with administering voting stations. Some voters came to vote only after finishing voter registration which involved examining their annual tax returns, and yet administrators at the voting stations patiently awaited their arrival despite these lengthy procedures (Fincher, 1981: 225).

Furthermore, there was a marked change in the quality of political participation. The American scholar Ernest P. Young observed that, compared to other periods in Chinese history, representative politics and competitive elections between individual political parties gained paramount status during the first two years of the Republic (1912–13) (Young, 1977: 76). Many commentators on early Chinese democracy have focused on negative phenomenon associated with the 1912–13 and 1918 elections, such as bribery, voting under someone else's name, administrative interference, and even violence. "From its beginning, Chinese democracy ... received negative press coverage. Chinese journalists and commentators lambasted the kind of corruption that would easily arise in the process of learning from western democracy" (Young, 1977: 224). The government frankly admitted to the existence of irregularities in the parliamentary elections. The home minister described that "in some provinces, illegal activities and cases of corruption were reported by telegraph to the authorities several times a day. In summary these consisted of cases of single individuals casting ballots repeatedly, or ballots being taken out with the candidates' names written on them in advance, or masquerading as another individual, or failure to report an illegal

act, or even openly buying and selling votes or engaging in acts of coercion” (“Telegram from the Home Minister to Provincial Governors and Civil Governors,” *Government Gazette*, January 21, 1913). Yet these drawbacks were hardly unique to China.<sup>5</sup> The opinion of the British-and-US-educated interwar democrat Luo Longji 羅隆基 was representative of views which favoured constitutional democracy despite its obvious faults:

Until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, seats in the British parliament could be bought and sold. How is this any different from the “swine MPs” in China? British elections were just as dark and sinister as, if not more, than early republican elections in China. These were all unavoidable in the process of constitutional evolution (Luo, 1940: 93).

Party politics achieved unprecedented growth during the early republican years. “After the establishment of the Republic, popular sentiment was in a state of excitement, and political parties reached far and wide” (Yang, Y., 1937: 4–5). There was high participation in parties. In May 1912, less than half a year after the establishment of the centre-right Republican Party, “its party membership cards have been distributed by all branches in south-central China”, and the party headquarters alone processed some sixty thousand membership cards. Yet membership requests were overwhelming, such that the printers produced thousands of cards every day “and yet hardly satisfied the needs” of the party; thousands more had to be printed every day (Zhang, J., 1981: 1009). Each day thousands of people requested to join the centre-left Chinese Revolutionary League, led by Dr Sun Yat-sen, after the Nanking Provisional Government had been set up (Tang 1979: 371). Amongst the 35 political parties which had clear manifestoes, most advocated industrialisation, popular education, administrative centralisation, ethnic assimilation, party cabinets, and the two-party system.

In the first parliamentary elections, political parties were highly important in organising and mobilising. “Not only was a huge amount of campaigning funding provided by the parties, the effect of limited voting resources was only maximised through their organised, rational distribution [i.e. the nomination process]” (Zhang, 2008: 130). The Republican Party for example took various measures to further its campaign. Firstly, it set up branches across the country to step up campaigning work and to effectively enforce orders from the headquarters. Secondly, it requested its party members to not give up their voting rights and to not elect candidates from other parties, or to cast empty ballots. Thirdly, it requested its staff to take a pre-emptive attitude with regard to campaigning and not fall behind other parties (“Notice on the Election” *Xuanju shunzhi*, *The China Times*, November 11, 1912). These parties then began to merge with one another. In May 1913 the Republican Party, the Unification Party, and the Democratic Party amalgamated to form the Progressive Party, and a two-party system with the KMT came into existence.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Until the 1883 Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act, seats in the British House of Commons could effectively be bought, and bribery in elections was rampant. What deserves attention is that although the 1918 Chinese elections were heavy tarnished by bribery, they were hardly violent, and this was not an easy achievement.

<sup>6</sup> Despite its name, the Progressive Party was relatively conservative in its views, compared to the

Political participation in the early Republic was elitist rather than mass-based. It has been said that “Parliamentary elections then only had the guise of political democracy, and not its substance ... those who were interested in politics were only an extreme minority of outstanding people, who were half-traditional and half-modern in their outlook. They consciously sought change, but the protection of their own interests was the priority” (Zhang, P., 1986b: 81). In a similar vein, early democratisation in Western countries also consisted solely of elite participation. Yet experience shows that, at low levels of institutionalisation, mass politics often led to crises in political participation and chaos (Huntington, 1996b: 79). The case of the Weimar Republic in the 1930s also shows that “the belief that a very high level of participation is always good for democracy is not valid” (Lipset, 1981: 32).

### The Functioning of Parliament and Political Reform

According to the Provisional Constitution and the Parliament Organisation Law, the main powers of parliament were to legislate and to monitor the executive. During its brief first session, which lasted for only half a year, the MPs showed themselves to be eager participants in the political process. Expanding on what had been achieved during the Advisory Council years, the MPs held agitated debates on matters mostly associated to Yuan Shikai, who had become provisional president. These included the assassination of KMT leader Song Jiaoren 宋教仁, the conclusion of a large foreign loan with the “five-nation banking consortium” (consisting of Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and Japan), the treaty with Russia over Outer Mongolia, and the state budget. The quality of the legislation was generally high for a new democracy and this peaked with the 1913 draft constitution. MPs concerned themselves in a manner never witnessed in prior or subsequent Chinese history with the protection of constitutional human rights,<sup>7</sup> and Provincial Councils were extraordinarily active. Progress on achieving judicial independence was also made with the establishment of a modern court system.

On April 8, 1913, the first parliamentary session of the Republic of China was convened in Peking. Parliament was bicameral, consisting of the Senate and the House of Representatives. There was a total of 892 MPs; 266 senators had been chosen by electoral colleges representing Outer Mongolia, Tibet, Qinghai, and the Overseas Chinese, as well as the Provincial Assemblies. The House of Representatives had 596 members, each representing 800,000 people (Zhang, Y., 1984: 113). Although this first parliament would be twice dissolved during its existence, it would manage to hold

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“radical” Kuomintang (Zhang, Y., 1986a: 277). More conservative parties would later emerge, including the Civic Party (*gongmindang* 公民黨) and the Great Central Party (*dazhongdang* 大中國) (Zhang, Y., 1986b: 319).

<sup>7</sup> In their written enquiries related to legislation, many MPs expressed their concern for human rights. For example, House Representative Wang Youlan’s [Wang Yu-lan] questionnaire stated that on May 12, 1913, some one hundred military and police officers surrounded the offices of *Guofeng Daily* and arrested its deputy manager, Pei Ziqing 裴梓青 (P’ei Tzu-ch’ing), chief editor, Guo Jiuqing 郭究竟 (Kuo Chiu-ching), and two distributors. They were taken to the Prosecutor’s Office and had not since been released. Wang pointed out that even if the journal had published untruthful or imprudent content, there would have been no need to arrest its staff, and expressed shock that such lawlessness could be perpetuated in the era of the Republic. (House of Representatives, 1914: 28)

three sessions and continued to exist until 1924.

The first two months of the first parliament were known as its “sacred era” (Zhang, Y., 1983: 124). The state budget was vetoed for the first time in Chinese history.<sup>8</sup> In the spirit of the Advisory Council, impeachments and questioning sessions were held one after another. The House raised 9 impeachments, 19 motions to advise the executive or to sanction certain members of the bureaucracy, and some 173 questionnaires. These touched upon all aspects of government administration and forced the resignation of Premier Zhao Bingjun 趙秉均 and Finance Minister Zhou Xuexi 周學熙. Under the Parliament Act, if MPs decided to raise an extraordinary motion, parliament could vote to request a Minister of State to send written evidence or attend a questioning session (“The Parliament Act” *Yiyuanfa*, clauses 40–43, law no. 7, *Zhengfu gongbao* 政府公報 [Government Gazette], September 28, 1913). Acting Premier Duan Qirui 段祺瑞 (Tuan Ch’i-jui) was questioned by parliament on the government’s decision to borrow a 25 million pound “reorganisation loan”, carrying harsh conditions, from the five-nation banking consortium.<sup>9</sup> Duan performed miserably and the MPs mocked the session as having “only questions but no answers” (“Stenographic Record No. 8 of the First Normal Session of the House of Representatives,” May 5, 1913; in HRPRS, 1913: 19).

Parliament also produced a draft constitution, and some 42 other bills, in a show of its legislative vitality (Zhang, Y., 1984: 140, 158). Laws passed included the Charter of the House of Representatives, the Charter of the Constituent Committee, the Charter of the Constituent Conference, the Public Observation of the Senate Ordinance and the Parliament Act. The Presidential Election Act, passed on October 5, 1913, was a piece of constitutional legislation, whilst the Arrest of Members of Parliament During Internal and External Emergencies Act was a part of the Penal Code. A number of bills were voted down.<sup>10</sup>

Local assemblies were also especially active during this period. During the revolution various Provincial Consultative Assemblies had declared their independence from the Empire and announced their conversion into Provisional Provincial Assemblies of the Republic. In early 1913, the first Provincial Assemblies were elected, and some such as Henan (Honan) also elected Prefectural Councils.<sup>11</sup> Provincial Assemblies became very active and serious in their legislative work,<sup>12</sup> and

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<sup>8</sup> The House of Representatives also criticised that “The budget for January to June [1913] was submitted in June, well past the due date, and in contravention to budgeting principles” (“Budget” *Yusuan’an* 預算案; in Li, 2001b: 97). The budget was ultimately vetoed, for the first time in Chinese history.

<sup>9</sup> The loan conditions have been described as “harsh”: “The interest rates were high, the fees charged were exorbitant, the lenders reserved the right to intervene in tax management, and the mortgaging of salt returns, and only 10.2 million pounds of the 25 million could be transferred to Yuan’s government” (Shan, 2018: 173).

<sup>10</sup> These included the Seventh Amendment to the Administrative Execution Act; the Voting Qualifications for the Central Electoral College Act; and amendments to the 5th Clause of the Parliament Organisation Act and the 5th Chapter of the of the Senate Election Act.

<sup>11</sup> It has been said that “During the 1911 Revolution, the most important change in elite society was the establishment of Prefectural Councils across the country” (Zhang, X., 2000: 50).

<sup>12</sup> Hubei’s Provisional and First Assembly achieved spectacular results and passed some 200 motions on



the Sichuan Assembly even vetoed the provincial government's budget (Lü, 1987: 259). The Jiangxi Assembly decided upon reducing the size of government (*jianzheng* 減政) and abolished certain departments (Lü, 1989: 231).<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately these Provincial Assemblies enjoyed only a short respite and were dissolved on February 28, 1914, following the dissolution of parliament.

Reforms to the judiciary were also underway. The Provisional Constitution stated that "Judges are to conduct trials independently and not be susceptible to interference from higher judicial or executive bodies". The Legal Code was based on the continental system, with separate courts for administrative, civil, and penal cases. Judicial independence was particularly prominent under the early Republic. During the Nanking Provisional Government, the justice minister and British barrister Wu Tingfang 伍廷芳 insisted on the rule of law, and largely managed to resist attempts at interfering the judiciary by the Shanghai military governor, Chen Qimei 陳其美 (Li, X., 2001). During the trial surrounding Song Jiaoren's assassination in 1913, the Shanghai local prosecutor summoned Premier Zhao Bingjun, who declined to appear in court due to health reasons: "Yet it was an unprecedented event, not to be repeated in twentieth-century Chinese judicial history, for a local magistracy to summon the premier and for local officials to publish evidence of frequent contact between high-ranking officials and the murder suspect" (Yuan, 2000). Progress in judicial reform did not cease afterwards. Much was achieved in the training of new judicial staff and in institutional reform. Unfortunately, the Provisional Constitution did not provide the courts with vital constitutional review powers; the judiciary therefore never achieved its full independence.

### Institutional Choice and Political Stability



*The Constituent Committee at their meeting place: Temple of Heaven, Peking*

finance, education, popular livelihood and impeachments ("Telegram on the Announcement by the Hubei Provincial Assembly of the Cessation of its Activities", *Shi bao* 時報, August 2, 1914). The Zhejiang (Chekiang) Assembly, set up in 1912, actively intervened in education, taxation and public works, and as a result conflicted with the local authorities (Schoppa, 1982: 84). Other Provincial Assembly achievements included the Anhui [Anhwei] Assembly querying its civil governor, Bai Wenwei 柏文蔚 (Pai Wen-wei) over a suspected breach of the law (Xie 1990: 49–50).

<sup>13</sup> The Foreign Office of the Provincial Government as well as the Preparatory Office of the Nanchang-Pingxiang (P'ing-hsiang) Railway.

During the 1912–3 transition, the main question was that of the choice between the presidential and parliamentary systems. To most of the constitution-drafters, participating in the Constituent Committee meant only preparing more lecture notes on constitutional theory, making poignant speeches at the meetings to argue for the supremacy of legislative power, and making sure that this power was to be secured by the provisions of the new constitution. Their failure shows that constitutional matters were not simply a question of academic principle, but one of suitability to the *de facto* distribution of political power. “For that political form is best that applies best” (Sartori 1994: 135).

In the early years of the Republic, the Beiyang establishment was the strongest political group, and Yuan Shikai received support from the military, the civil service, late-imperial constitutionalists, and the bourgeoisie. Given such political realities, it would have been impractical to force Yuan to give up his real political power and to assume a ceremonial presidential role. Yuan himself declared that he had a popular mandate and could not stand aside when the nation’s fate was at stake (Zhu, 1983: 56). He was interested in a presidential system, or should we say, something akin to the semi-presidential system of the French Fifth Republic; yet the KMT insisted upon a parliamentary system in defiance of political reality, and even proposed a constitutional arrangement where parliament was supreme.

Matters came to a head between the Beiyang establishment led by Yuan Shikai and the KMT-dominated parliament with the 1913 draft constitution, known as the “Temple of Heaven Draft” (*Tiantan xiancao* 天壇憲草) after the location where the Constituent Committee’s meetings were held. The newly born parliament guarded its rights jealously, excluding requests from Yuan Shikai, local gentry and military elites to participate in constitution-making, and embarked alone on this task. This, and the resultant document, sparked strong opposition from the pro-Yuan establishment. To stop the draft from being passed in parliament, Yuan Shikai ordered all 438 KMT MPs be stripped of their seats on November 4, 1913. A quorum could no longer be maintained, and the parliamentary secretariat stopped issuing daily agendas from November 14 onwards. The first session was effectively closed. On January 10, 1914, the remaining MPs were also stripped of their offices, and parliament was dissolved to force the termination of the drafting process. China’s first attempt at a democratic transition utterly failed.

Although many historians have accused Yuan Shikai of sabotaging the drafting process, and hinted at a hostile environment for the drafters, this was not exactly the case. Yuan and the Beiyang establishment, even after having announced their opposition to the draft constitution, did not violate the broad principles of reasonable constitutional government; Yuan did not even request the constitutional power to dissolve parliament. One must not judge these events with the hindsight of Yuan’s later illegal decision to dissolve parliament and install a Latin American-style “super presidential” system, a very common mistake committed by many analyses of Yuan. In July 1913, sections of the KMT under Sun Yat-sen, using Song Jiaoren’s assassination as a *casus belli*, started the “Second Revolution” against Yuan Shikai and rebelled militarily. To suppress these rebels Yuan ordered the arrest of five members of the Constituent Committee. Yuan’s actions received support from leaders of the

Progressive Party, which represented the erstwhile constitutionalists. Liang Qichao “justified Yuan’s suppression and fully supported his decision to wipe out the ‘mobs’” which he saw as being “more disastrous than deluge and wild animals” (Su & He, 2013: 320; as cited in Shan, 2018: 177); this was whilst Tang Hualong, another Progressive Party leader, called for the “immediate extermination” of the “treasonous” rebels (Zhang, 2008: 273; as cited in Shan, 2018: 177).

Yet whatever Yuan did at this stage was very different from the wholesale and illegal dismissal of KMT MPs and the dissolution of the KMT in November, which was aimed at preventing parliament from continuing to meet and to also create an excuse for its eventual dissolution. Between these two events, Yuan still hoped to influence legally the drafting process, and held back from the final decision to illegally terminate it altogether. The Constituent Committee did not stop meeting due to Yuan’s opposition even after the Second Revolution had begun. The fact that it produced the “Temple of Heaven Draft” clearly shows that they were still able to function independently. Nor did the military attempt to intervene throughout the three and a half months when the document was being drafted. Their protests only began after the draft was nearing completion on October 25. The funds required by the committee were provided by the Ministry of Finance. The atmosphere in which the drafting was done was largely peaceful and stable.

Regrettably, the “Temple of Heaven Draft” would only come to signify the failure of the democratic transition in early Republican China. On October 25, 1913, when the second reading was close to completion, President Yuan sent a circular telegram to all provincial military leaders, voicing his opposition to the draft and accusing it of being worse than the Provisional Constitution (Li, 1914: 34–35). The leaders of the Beiyang military-bureaucratic establishment and the provincial military leaders followed suit and sent many telegrams attacking the draft. On November 4 Yuan sent a second circular telegram to the provinces stating his refusal to accept the draft constitution and announced the dissolution of the KMT, stripping its MPs of their seats. Without a quorum, the drafting could no longer carry on.

Yuan’s politics were in fact originally more flexible than most would imagine. During the North–South Peace Negotiations at the end of 1912, Yuan suggested “convening parliament and submitting the question of the choice between monarchy or democracy to their decision as a way of salvaging the situation” (“Telegram from the Northern Minister Plenipotentiary Tang Shaoyi at the Peace Conference,” December 27, 1911; in Luo and Liu, 2013: 225). Soon afterwards, Yuan announced to the foreign media that he hoped to stay in office as prime minister until a general election was held and parliament was established (“Statement Authorised for Release by Associated Press”; January 23, 1912; in Luo and Liu, 2013: 274). Upon assumption of office as provisional president, Yuan had once advocated that China’s republican system should be based on that of France, but that the American method of electing the president (i.e. universal male suffrage) should be adopted (“Discussion on Important Political Matters between Special Envoy Cai and President Yuan”; in Luo and Liu, 2013: 619). It is worth noting that, by proposing this, Yuan’s stance was even more democratic than the KMT parliamentary majority, which was content with the French system, with the president being elected by parliament.

More importantly, “the choice of constitutional model does relate to the long-term stability or instability of a democracy” (You, 1997: 51). Writing in the 1920s, Tang Yi 湯漪, the US-educated former chairman of the Constituent Committee, wrote that “the source of internal strife in the Republic is in its institutions, and not in its politics. Bad politics is without exception the result of institutions” (Tang, 1921, 28). Modern constitutional theorists such as Juan José Linz have written on the relation between choice of constitutional system and success in democratisation. Presidential systems are widely seen to have undue effects on the stability of transitional politics. These include the possible political deadlock between the executive and the legislature, and the fact that “first past the post” presidential election winners inherently lack the spirit of power sharing and political compromise as found in cabinet systems, which may lead to autocratic tendencies. These are particularly damaging for newly formed democracies, which may have a highly varied ethnic, religious or linguistic composition (Chen, 2000: 217–18). The example of Woodrow Wilson’s bill to enter the League of Nations being vetoed by the US Congress was used by republican Chinese scholars to explain that political deadlock could happen in a presidential system (Zhu, 1922: 2). A parliamentary system has several main advantages (Stepan & Skach, 1994), but also prominent drawbacks, the most damning of which being the frequent change of government when the inter-party balance shifts. Frequent cabinet dissolution in the Third and Fourth French Republics is a case in point (Xu, 2002: 22, 27).

Similar to the French case was the early Republic of China, which was modelled on the French Third Republic, and had four cabinets in the first two years of its existence; Premier Lu Zhengxiang 陸徵祥 had a term of only three months in the face of formidable opposition in the Senate. As Ceaser puts it, a parliamentary system “may produce an executive force that is stalemated on the level of the primary executive power and weaker as a policymaking instrument than the American presidency” (Ceaser, 1992: 182–183). Besides, the efficacy of a parliamentary system of government is highly correlated to the extent of development of the political parties, and whether the governing party can normally achieve a majority.<sup>14</sup> Evidently, the fragile party politics of the early Republic were unable to satisfy the institutional needs of a parliamentary system. By contrast, the strength of a presidential system was its practicality. Such a system did not pose extraordinary requirements for the depth of political party development or the quality of the voters and could produce a strong and stable government (Yang, 1998). Most democracies that have collapsed in twentieth-century Africa, Asia, and southern Europe were parliamentary systems (Shugart & Carey, 2000: 27–8).

The failure of the Chinese democratic transition shows that the chosen constitutional model must reflect on the multi-focal nature of political interest. With hindsight, given China’s tradition of executive centralisation, the real power of the Beiyang establishment, and the highly fragmented political will of the many parliamentary parties, the appropriate constitutional model for 1913 might have been something akin to the “semi-presidential system” chosen by Charles de Gaulle in 1958 after taking into account the lessons of the French Third and Fourth Republics. This

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<sup>14</sup> Strong government in the British parliamentary system “relies on the ‘accident’ of a party system in which one of the parties normally wins a majority of seats in the Parliament and does not have to govern in a coalition” (Ceaser, 1992: 134–135, 183) which is fundamentally different to the multi-party systems and weak governments of France and Italy.

system bears both the merits of the presidential and parliamentary systems. The president holds vast real political authority, and the premier reports to him – an arrangement that could satisfy the needs of strongmen like Yuan Shikai. Meanwhile, disputes between the executive and the legislature can be resolved with relative ease. The president can dissolve parliament after having consulted the premier and the speakers of both houses of parliament. The success of the French Fifth Republic shows that a strong president can co-exist with a stable, effective cabinet (Zhang, Q., 2000: 27–28). The experiences of the “third wave of democratisation” shows that, for countries engaging in democratic transition, a semi-presidential system is more attractive than a pure parliamentary system (Lin, 2000: 168).

### **The End Result: The Breakdown of the Democratic Transition**

“Not revolution but rather the search for a constitutional order to replace the dynasties has been the most important theme in twentieth-century China’s history, and it remains so today” (Waldron, 1995: 26). Examining the democratic transition in early Republican China, the failures worldwide in democratisation tells us that, even had Chinese democracy managed to soldier on somehow, there would not be an easy course for its future development. Given the low levels of modernisation, democratic tradition, and civil society – the structural elements of a functioning democracy that China lacked – the country almost stood no chance of consolidating successful democratic government in the early twentieth century. Wellington Koo, a Columbia University-educated Chinese diplomat who served several times as prime minister during the last years of the Beiyang regime in the 1920s, remarked in his memoirs that “Democracy cannot be born overnight and I do not think that the experience China had during the last fifty years in facing the problems of democratic government is unique to China” (Koo, 1976: 240). No country then, and very few now, have achieved democracy in one go.

A democratic transition is considered failed when democracy degenerates into autocracy or even totalitarianism. After the dissolution of the first parliament, China became the first country in the twentieth century to transition from democracy back into autocracy. After another failed stint in 1916–1927 with representative politics, single-party rule under the KMT began in 1927 and lasted for another twenty years. Experience worldwide has shown that democratisation, far from being a linear process, is one long zig-zag where an autocracy repeatedly attempts a transition. A smooth transition is hardly possible. In this sense, the collapse of democracy is in fact a common and not entirely unreasonable political phenomenon. As Samuel Huntington observed, very few countries in the twentieth century could set up a democratic political system at the first attempt (Huntington, 1996a: 270–9). European authoritarian regimes such as Salazar’s Portugal and Francoist Spain, and radical totalitarian regimes such as fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, were all reactions to failures in democratisation (Fewsmith, 1985: 172).

What can be seen from various failures at democratisation in history, including the Chinese case, is that rather than such failure being purely the result of reaction from vested interests, it is also correlated to the degree of radicalism in the promotion of democratisation. The Spanish democratic transition had been a possibility in 1931: even the military approved of the peaceful transition of power to the democrats, yet the left wing, which was in the majority and in charge of drafting the constitution,

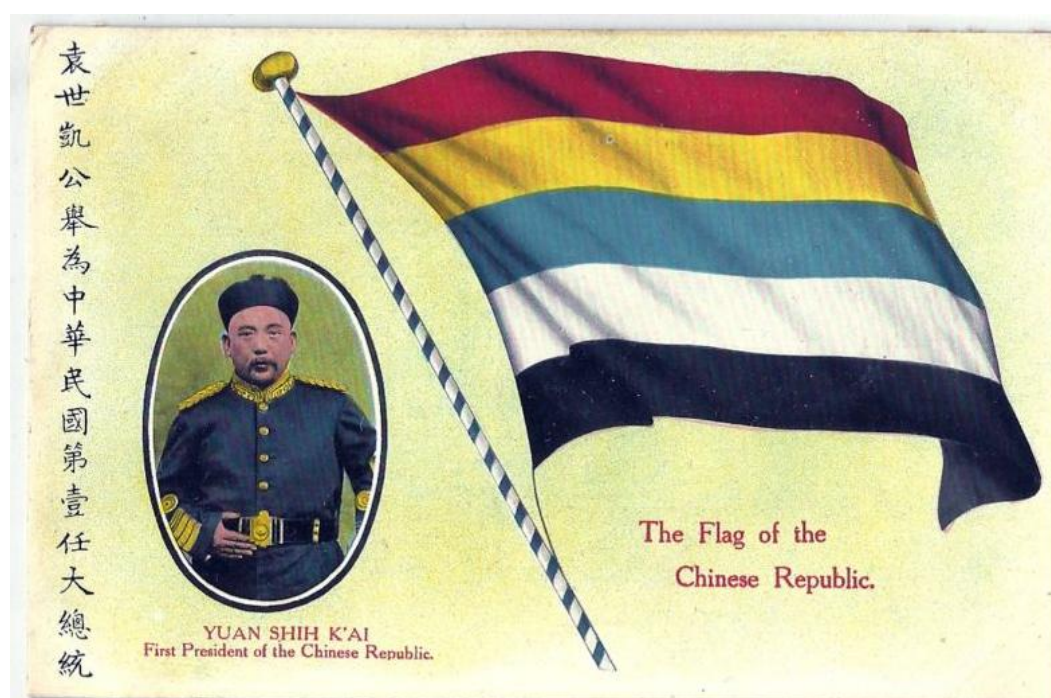
ignored major socio-economic and local interests, and added many radical provisions to the constitution, such as the imprudent decision to separate the widely-supported church from the state, and to reduce the power of the military, which not long ago had been key to the transition (Bonime-Blanc, 1987: 120–121). These radical measures constituted the sentimental reasons which brought the downfall of the Spanish Second Republic five years later and the subsequent civil war (Bonime-Blanc, 1987: 115). It has been said that constitution-making in Spain during the 1930s was “dissensual”: “a process in which not all political actors participate, dogmatic solutions prevail and problems are often unresolved or resolved irresponsibly. Agreements are difficult to reach, and if reached frequently exclude the views of one or more major political parties. The resulting constitutional text is one that poses a potential threat to the stability of the new political system” (Bonime-Blanc, 1987: 13–4). In a political environment that was simultaneously highly promising and challenging, the parliamentary elite and holders of real power made a series of decisions which contravened the principles of democratic politics. Not only did these men have to pay a huge political price, the democratic transition in Spain, as in China two decades earlier, was brought to a total halt at huge cost to generations of Spanish people.

In the Chinese case, radicalism and an uncompromising winner-take-all attitude germinated during the Advisory Council years and blossomed during the first republican parliament, which was dominated by radicals during 1912–3. On the choice of political system, the KMT parliamentary majority opposed the presidential system and hoped to expand the powers of the legislature at the expense of the executive. They believed that the most important principle in making the constitution was to “radically extend popular rights and prevent the revival of autocracy, and to stem any betrayal by the President” against the democratic system (“Weeping at the death of Mr. Song Dunchu [Jiaoren] and an announcement to our party,” *Minli bao*, March 28, 1913). The KMT was so confident of their control of the direction of constitution-making that one member of the Constituent Committee boasted: “I believe it is unanimously agreed here that the cabinet system be adopted and that absolutely nobody is advocating for a presidential system and opposes a cabinet system” (“Minutes of the Sixth Meeting of the Constituent Committee”; quoted in Li, 2007: 117)

The moderates had only a fraction of the political might of the Kuomintang radicals and failed to muster any meaningful resistance, and it must be remembered that it was these moderates who had opened the “Pandora’s box” of political radicalism during the Advisory Council years. By 1913, even when the Beiyang establishment demonstrated the willingness to negotiate, the moderates were no longer in a position to collaborate with the establishment to control the constitution-making process. This was why the political choices made by the radicals mattered most. The fate that subsequently befell many of these men is not a reason for us to forget about the glamour that they briefly enjoyed and the arrogance that they once possessed. Their mistaken choices during the drafting of the constitution sealed the fate of the democratic transition. Just like the French Jacobins, the Chinese radicals were unwilling and unable to distribute political power fairly and to pick an appropriate constitutional model through political consensus. It has been argued that “Chinese expectations for the probity of politicians in a constitutional order were

probably unrealistically high. Normal political compromises was seen as betrayals, tactical shifts as evidence of lack of principle” (Nathan, 1983: 278).

For the Beiyang men, who had hoped to profit from the new institutional set-up – namely the republican form of government – their hopes were quashed by the radicals’ draft constitution. Hence they seethed with anger; democratisation lost its last appeal to the Beiyang establishment and could no longer call on their support. Experience with Third Wave democratisation during the late twentieth century has shown that the first objective of the transition should be to bring forth an institutional compromise, in order to guarantee the survival of the constitutional arrangement. Even if setbacks were encountered, and military coups did happen to force democratic institutions into co-existing with some degree of authoritarianism, as long as there is no regression into outright totalitarianism, political liberalisation could still carry on, albeit with some difficulty. Any fault or immaturity could be tolerated in a pluralistic political model. Only when this is the case would a second or third attempt at democratisation stand a greater chance of success.<sup>15</sup>



*Postcard celebrating Yuan Shikai's election as the first president of the Chinese Republic*

The worst consequence of a failed experiment with democratisation is the loss of faith in the objective of democratisation itself, as was the case with the Chinese political elite. Yan Huiqing 顏惠慶 (W. W. Yen), a US-educated diplomat who was premier on five occasions during the 1920s, wrote that “in the precipitous haste and intense blind enthusiasm to adopt a republican form of government it was not generally understood that a republic could not be successfully created in a day or a year, but would require

<sup>15</sup> Experience with democratisation in Latin America, Southern, and Eastern Europe demonstrates that “Historically the first efforts to establish democracy in countries frequently fail; second efforts often succeed. One plausible reason for this pattern is that learning occurred ... Later democratizers not only received a snowballing impetus to regime change from those who had done it earlier, they also learned lessons from the previous experience of others” (Huntington, 1996a: 172–173).

decades of education and preparation, for all progress, including political, is accomplished not by leaps and bounds but by slow and laborious steps” (Yen, 1974: 294). Having encountered defeat, people lost their confidence in democracy and turned to alternative solutions, including totalitarian ones. Political liberalisation in China was brought to an end in 1927 with the KMT’s single-party state, and democracy remained henceforth illusory.

What deserves to be noted is that, in the 1990s, the KMT achieved the first successful democratic transition in Chinese history through a consensus-based constitution revision with the elected representatives of its challenger, the Taiwanese Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Peaceful transfers of power between the two parties have subsequently happened three times; three decades later, the DPP has still not achieved its initial electoral promise of changing the name of the state from the Republic of China – established in Nanking in 1912 – to the Republic of Taiwan. This is a clear indication of the extent of this grand compromise.

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## China's Rise and "Responsibility" in the 21st Century

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### Abstract

*In recent decades "responsibility" has become a prominent idea in international political discourse. Against this backdrop, international policy and scholarly communities contemplating China's rise regularly address themselves to "whether, when, and how" China will become a "responsible" great power. This article reviews, unpacks and questions understandings of responsibility in the debates about China. One strand of these debates argues that China can become responsible by adopting and promoting the existing "status quo"; the other argues that China acts responsibly when it challenges the unfair hegemony of the status quo. This article argues that both debates operate with remarkably similar understandings of responsibility. Whether China adopts existing rules and norms or establishes rules and norms of its own responsibility is understood to be rule and norm compliance. The article explores the possibility of an alternative understanding of responsibility suggested by Jacques Derrida. It is argued that a Derridian approach does not dispense with rules and norms but is conscious of the irresolvable dilemma when faced with the demands of multiple others. Such an understanding is helpful insofar as it reminds those who would call for responsibility that such responsibility, and politics itself, is more than simply following rules and maintenance of norms.*

**Keywords:** *responsibility, Derrida, China as a great power, Xi Jinping, Chinese thought, rules and norms.*

### Introduction

In recent decades "responsibility" has become an important trope in international political discourse. The demands to act in a responsible way range from military intervention (e.g. the "Responsibility to Protect," or R2P) to the protection of the environment (see Ban Ki-moon's comments reported in Associated Press, 2012) and the responsibility current generations have to future generations and for historical injustices. Furthermore, responsibility extends not just to particular actions but also points to a relationship with the framework and norms that underpin and authorise those actions. Thus, President Donald Trump has called on Russia to "join the community of responsible nations" (Wintour, 2017), and to play its role in recognising and preserving international norms.

Within this context it is regularly asked whether, when and how China will become a “responsible power,” “responsible great power,” or “responsible major country” (*fuzeren de daguo* 负责任的大国). It is said that seeking international legitimacy as such has become “a defining feature of China’s foreign policy” (Loke, 2009: 202), and that “international responsibility” has become “one of the most significant topics in Chinese International Relations studies over the last decade” (Mao Weizhun, 2017: 173). This is reflected in the rhetoric of the Chinese elite. President Xi Jinping made responsibility a key theme of his speech to the 2017 World Economic Forum, paying special attention to the rules designed to mitigate against climate change that were previously agreed upon under the terms of the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change: “One should not select or bend rules as he sees fit ... All signatories should stick to [the Paris Agreement] instead of walking away from it as this is a responsibility we must assume for future generations” (Xi Jinping, 2017).

Yet, despite these calls, literatures also often point out the lack of agreement as to what responsibility means in this type of context (e.g. Loke, 2009: 198; Loke, 2016: 847; Yeophantong, 2013: 329–64). What exactly does it mean for China to become “responsible”? Indeed, what does it mean to talk about any state or actor becoming responsible? Responding to these questions, this article engages with conceptualisations of responsibility that are at work in these debates. Ostensibly, the debate about China’s rise appears to be about two contrasting understandings of how China can act responsibly. The first claims that China is acting responsibly if it adopts, maintains and promotes the “status quo” of the international community. The second claims that China acts responsibly when it challenges the unfair rules and norms or the status quo and promotes a fairer system. This article argues that the *fundamental idea of responsibility* in these debates is more uniform than it first appears. Both positions in the debates agree that as a “major power” China needs to promote peace and stability by complying with certain rules and norms. In other words, in these debates, responsibility is narrowed to mean rule and norm compliance.

Thus, whilst this article does not intend to make a direct contribution to the existing literature on rules and norms, its focus on responsibility as adherence to rules and norms brings it into relation with this literature. The role of norms in regulating and guiding actors in international relations is now well established, and much work now focuses on “how, when and why norms emanate and evolve” (Björkdahl, 2002: 9). This article is concerned with norms understood in their regulative, evaluative, and prescriptive dimensions. As Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 891) have observed: “It is precisely the prescriptive (or evaluative) quality of ‘oughtness’ that sets norms apart from other kinds of rules.” Norms, then, are sets of assumptions about what ought to happen and why (Katzenstein, 1996: 20). As such, they are necessarily shared (Katzenstein, 1996: 21; Jepperson et al., 1996: 54). In essence, norms are a set of shared assumptions about what should be done and why. Furthermore, norms establish what kinds of actors there can be in a system, and place demands, permissions, and prohibitions on those actors (Kowert and Legro, 1996: 468). Thus, in Katzenstein’s (1996: 5) words: “In some situations norms operate like rules that define the identity of an actor ... In other situations norms operate as standards that specify the proper enactment of an already defined identity ... Norms thus either define (or constitute) identities or prescribe (or regulate) behaviour, or they do both.” Rules can be considered to be articulated and concrete instructions which issue from the

attempt to realise norms. The rules of any given system tell actors who must act, when they must act, and how they must act. Thus, if norms are the desired destination, then the rules and their practices are directions for getting there.

This article reviews, unpacks and questions this understanding of responsibility as rule and norm compliance. It draws on the work of Jacques Derrida to help to show that responsibility as rule and norm compliance is *one* understanding of responsibility, but not the only one that is possible. This opens space for an attendant claim about the location of politics. Existing debates that understand responsibility to be a question of rule compliance take China to pose a dilemma between competing hegemonic visions. In contrast, a Derridian approach suggests that politics and responsibility are concerned with how one responds to others in a world where the foundations for action are uncertain, and where attending to the welfare of some necessarily means neglecting the welfare of others. The contribution of this article is therefore primarily analytical and theoretical. Its aim is to explore the role that responsibility is playing in thinking about China, and to open a space for thinking about alternative ways of framing responsibility. In so doing, it also raises the question about the understanding of politics which stands behind these assumptions. The article therefore prepares the ground and provides some tools for those wishing to think about the meaning and use of responsibility in a wider way, and in areas beyond China, such as R2P, the environment and intergenerational justice.

The rest of this article explores these ideas. First, some conceptual clarification is undertaken specifically to explain standard meanings of responsibility in the Anglophone and Sinophone traditions. What is found is a striking similarity concerning how responsibility is understood (be it explicit or implicit), namely responsibility concerns observing rules and norms and playing one's role within such a system. Second, this article illustrates (in two parts) this claim in relation to demands that China become a "responsible power." Both the understanding of China as accepting and promoting rules and norms (the "status quo approach"), and the view that China can become responsible by challenging these rules and norms, are two sides of the same conceptual coin. The last part of the article looks at an alternative to this understanding of responsibility by exploring the suggestive ideas of Derrida. It is argued that a Derridian approach does not dispense with rules but is conscious of the irresolvable dilemma when faced with the demands of multiple others. Such an understanding is helpful insofar as it reminds those who would call for responsibility that such responsibility, and politics itself, is more than simply following rules and maintenance of norms.

### **Responsibility: Western, Chinese, and Derridian**

Responsibility is a comparatively new concept in the West, and somewhat under-analysed (Williams, 2014). Although instances of the use of "responsibility" can be dated from the late 1550s, in English and French the term has a strong connection to political events such as the American and French revolutions, and only later (in the twentieth century) being more closely connected to metaphysical and moral questions concerning agency (cf. Williams, 2014). In terms of its political heritage, McKeon explains in detail how responsibility was connected to the idea of "responsible government" in the 1800s, and that this notion is an extension of the older notion of accountability (McKeon, 1957: 24; for how accountability is now



associated with “norms” see Brennan et al., 2013: 37). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth OED) records the continuing influence of this original context. Here, older instances of the term “responsible” are connected to the ability and obligation to pay debts or fulfil duties (dating back to the 1500s and 1600s). The OED (2019) also records how responsibility is connected to holding an office, role or appointment, and to be the cause or originator of something.

The entries in the OED reflect the original political and juridical meaning of being responsible, which connects it to holding a role. A juridical understanding of the idea can also be seen in the political debates that frame the origin of the term. To be responsible is to be subject to punishment when infringing the rights of others (McKeon, 1957; Ricoeur, 2000). However, as Ricoeur (2000: 11–12) has observed, currently there is a “proliferation and dispersion of uses of this term.” Significantly, to be responsible is both to “answer for” and “to respond to.” This is what is, in part, reflected in contemporary thinking about being responsible to/for future generations, the environment, and those who suffer poverty, disease, famine, and the consequences of war. In the international context this is realised in terms of adherence to rules and norms. In other words, the juridical sense of being responsible has not been abandoned, even as the notion of responsibility has changed from infringing the rights of others to actively promoting their welfare. Furthermore, an actor is responsible by virtue of the role that they hold; and that role is not only defined by a system or rules and norms, it also places obligations on that actor to adhere to those rules and norms. Failure to do so is occasion for imputation (Raffoul, 2004: 44).

These “European” understandings of responsibility resonate with Chinese understandings. Indeed, both Western and Chinese understanding of responsibility are remarkably similar. There is a longer Chinese tradition of understanding responsibility, which also connects “responsibility” to compliance with some set of established and calculable rules and norms. The Chinese term for responsibility in these debates, *zeren* 责任, is made up of characters indicating “duty” (*ze* 责), and positioning in the sense of to “serve in a position” (*ren* 任) (Hanyu da zidian weiyuanhui, 1995: 6.3626.3, 1.122.6; Karlgren, 1974 [1923]: 634, 1045, GSR67f; Wieger, 1965 [1915]: 82c). The etymology and pictographic makeup of the characters associate them with money (through the radical 贝 in the lower part of *ze*), indebtedness and the duties that come with a particular position. This etymology and pictographic make-up thereby points towards an understanding of *zeren* as something calculable and contractual. Further association with blame and punishment sits in parallel with English language use in terms of accountability in relation to such calculable duties or rules (Williams, 2014). This, then, is the general picture which underpins both the view that supports, and the view that seeks to replace, the status quo. In both accounts, acting responsibly means identifying rules concerning what one should do, and then following those rules.

However, a different, albeit related, use of responsibility in the Chinese tradition conceptualises it not as a duty, but as a virtue. This is the usage that has received the least attention in the discipline of philosophy, dominated by a Western tradition of thought (Williams, 2014). Nevertheless, virtue is clearly important in the Chinese philosophical tradition of understanding *zeren* and many current

exceptionalist claims about Chinese responsibility draw on this understanding of *zeren*. The character *ren* 任 depicts a person (人) and a pole supported in the middle with an object attached at each end (壬). It indicates the burden of carrying something on one's shoulders and emphasises the importance of people to responsibility (Hanyu da zidian weiyuanhui, 1995: 1.122.6; Karlgren, 1974 [1923]: 634, GSR67f; Wieger, 1965 [1915]: 82c). Perhaps responsibility, then, is not only a question of living up to some set and calculable norms or rules that one is duty-bound to perform based on one's position. Responsibility can also be understood as a virtue concerned with the demands and burdens that being with other people places on us in terms of virtues, morals, or ethics beyond rules. Although these ideas find support in Chinese history and etymology, this understanding of responsibility has not been given enough room in the debates over China as a responsible power.

In this discussion about the meaning of responsibility the Derrida's thought provides some resources to develop an alternative perspective and understanding. Derrida's account offers a view of responsibility which explicitly opposes "responsibility" to the obedience to rules. Simply put, by obeying rules one is not making any decision about what is an appropriate course of action, as that decision has already been made. This does not mean that Derrida is advocating the abandonment of rules (Peterson, 1997: 288); it does however mean that the moment of responsibility comes before and after any given action (Peterson, 1997: 288), and outside of any rules and norms. Furthermore, whereas adherence to rules and norms would seem to imply that the "right thing" can be done, Derrida's view understands responsibility to be made conceivable by an irresolvable form of dilemma. In acting, one can never know what is right. Derrida is not merely concerned that some rules may contradict other rules – such a dilemma could be resolved *if* it were possible to construct a consistent set of rules. Nor is he concerned with finding a way to know that the norms that underpin the rules are the correct ones. Derrida's key concern is that there is simply no way to choose between the foundations for sets of rules – indeed, Derrida doubts the existence of any such foundations. Thus, responsibility is marked by an irresolvable dilemma not because one must choose between two equally valid rules, nor because one cannot be certain of the basis of those rules, but because responsibility is a recognition of the unjustness of any decision. There are no solid foundations for making a decision about whose call for help is responded to, and in helping some there are always others who are not helped.

This leads to the final suggestion. Derrida's notion of responsibility opens a path to understanding how responsibility is – and must be – political. Given that politics involves plural others, in attending to the needs of some inevitably, necessarily, the needs of others are neglected. Sometimes duties will be exclusionary of each other. In such a situation, to perform any duties at all, one must decide which "other" will be responded to. By linking responsibility to the undecidable decision, Derrida does not conceive of responsibility in relation to a technology or legislation of politics, but to a politics which is understood to be focused on the encounter with the other. Thus, Derrida's deconstruction of the concept helps understand China's rise in a more nuanced way and reemphasises the politics of its ethico-political decisions as a responsible power. Thus, politics is not about the power-play between sets of rules backed by aspiring hegemonies but about the very choices involved in setting rules and responding to others in conditions of uncertainty.

## China as Responsible Power, Part 1: Maintenance of the Status Quo

In this and the next section the article considers how understandings of responsibility have been articulated by politicians and thinkers in relation to Chinese foreign affairs. Renewed interest in China's "great power responsibility" emerged after 2005, when Robert Zoellick (then US deputy secretary of state), called on China to become a "responsible stakeholder" by sustaining and strengthening "the international system that has enabled its success" (Zoellick, 2005: 94, 98). Such responsibility would see China adjusting "to the international rules developed over the last century" (Zoellick, 2005: 94). Zoellick's speech explicitly connected responsibility to maintenance of the status quo. To be responsible meant recognising and adhering to established norms. It also placed an obligation on China to protect and develop such norms. China's "responsibility" was to accept existing norms and find its relevant place in the status quo; failure to do so would cast China as irresponsible and a threat.

Zoellick's speech expresses what is more than a decade later a commonplace view of Chinese responsibility. His connection between responsibility and norms has been most visible when China is criticised for failing to act in accordance with norms and values which are considered "absolute." Chief amongst these are the protection of human rights and the prevention of genocide. Two examples illustrate this. First, China has been accused of irresponsibly assisting genocide in Darfur through providing loans, weapons, and military training to the government regime. For example, Nicholas D. Kristof asked, in the *New York Times*, "whether China's rise will be accompanied by increasingly responsible behavior in its international relations." "Darfur is a test," he added, "and for now China is failing" (Kristof, 2006). Second, in 2012, a UN Security Council resolution calling on Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to resign was vetoed by China and Russia. Then British foreign secretary William Hague's comment reflected the views of many state leaders: "Russia and China will be held responsible for this terrible situation ... They didn't cause the situation, but they are standing in the way of the Security Council" (BBC, 2012b).

When China (together with a number of authoritarian states) voted against a later resolution these sentiments were reiterated in the English-language press. *The Atlantic* argued that "Beijing's support for pariah states is undermining its goal of becoming a responsible global player" (Piekos, 2012). In both cases, the PRC was accused of being irresponsible, because it broke what were thought of as norms of the international system. As a result, scholar Yong Deng has negatively labelled China a "post-responsible" power that irresponsibly challenges the rules and norms of the status quo (Yong Deng, 2014: 118).

China has also been accused of failing to act responsibly by not doing more to promote international norms. On this view, acting responsibly is something more than simply not acting irresponsibly. It involves the active acceptance and promotion of obligations, burdens, and duties. For example, the higher level of responsibility required by the UN for members of the Security Council has resulted in some criticising China for remaining detached from its responsibilities as a council member after joining it in the 1970s. The apparent shift in later years to increasingly constructive contributions to the decision-making process has also been praised as China "stepping up to its responsibilities." Likewise, Chinese support at the 2005 UN

World Summit for the adoption of “responsibility to protect” as a “guiding principle” has been lauded as indicating a more “responsible” China (for a discussion on China's shifting attitude to R2P see Teitt, 2011). Such a China acts responsibly by accepting existing international norms and its appropriate role in developing rules from those norms.

Clearly China has its role to play – but this does not mean that all roles are equivalent. States play different roles depending on their position and capabilities, and responsibility is differentiated. This has led some to claim that China acts responsibly when it recognises and fulfils its role in the status quo. Advocates of the “China responsibility” thesis (*Zhongguo zeren lun* 中国责任论) sensitive to context and emphasise the need for the PRC to rethink its national interest in light of its rise (Yeophantong, 2013: 348). This is a question of recognising and fulfilling various criteria that would indicate responsibility. Such “responsibility requirements” (*zeren xuqiu* 责任需求) have been outlined by Wang Yizhou (1999), and separately by Xia Liping, who lists a number of “criteria of [a] responsible power” (Xia Liping, 2001: 17). This line of reasoning resonates in a number of concepts deployed in the debates over Chinese international responsibility, including China’s “self-positioning” (*ziwo dingwei* 自我定位) and “international responsibility positioning” (*guoji zeren dingwei* 国际责任定位), that all tie the responsibility a particular actor should take to its position (*dingwei* 定位) in the international system (Chan 2006, 15–16; Wang Yizhou, 1999; Xiao Huanrong, 2003: 48–49). The idea of what kind of things should be taken responsibility *for* appears uncontested – it is just a question of who is in an appropriate position to do what. The key task becomes a question of establishing the allocation of duties; and these duties depend on the norms of the status quo. This is also reflected in Xiao Huanrong’s analysis of three different power positions in international society, each of which corresponds to a different set of responsibilities. In Xiao’s scheme a superpower’s local responsibility is to strengthen wealth and security, its regional responsibility to acquire spheres of influence, and its global responsibility to take charge of international order (Xiao Huanrong, 2003: 48; for a discussion see Yeophantong, 2013: 351). The question, then, becomes one of whether China is a “superpower.” If it is, then it should take on the responsibilities attributed to this status, which means accepting the established norms of international society. If it is not, then it can act responsibly by recognising this and fulfilling the duties that its position dictates.

Notions of differentiated responsibility feed into the view that China can best discharge its responsibility in international affairs by focusing on its own stability and development. On this view, China’s responsibility is a kind of “self-responsibility” (Shih Chih-yu and Huang Chiung-Chiu, 2013: 351). This thesis contrasts with the idea that China needs to take on external responsibilities that come with great-power status (for example Hu Liping, 2002: 121–23; Liang Shoude, 1997: 1–9; Yu Xintian, 2006: 102–14). On this logic of self-responsibility, Shih Chih-yu and Huang Chiung-Chiu argue that

China is neither culturally nor politically prepared to be effectively involved in global governance. In their recurring pledge that China will be a “responsible major country” ... effective self-governance is how the Beijing authorities currently believe China should contribute to global governance (Shih Chih-yu and Huang Chiung-Chiu, 2013: 352; cf. Xi Jinping’s rhetoric in Wenweipo, 2009).

In other words, China's self-responsibility *is* international responsibility (Ren Xiao, 2007: 27, cited in Zhu Liqun, 2010: 42; Shih Chih-yu and Huang Chiung-Chiu, 2013: 365; Yeophantong, 2013: 357; see also Hua Jian, 2011: 43). In this way, the PRC government has emphasised how it will not challenge the status quo, so that China will never be a threat to anyone (see BBC, 2012a; Qin Jize, 2007). Thus, whilst it might be claimed that China's alleged fragility prevents it from taking an overt role in international leadership and thus assuming responsibility (Shih Chih-yu and Huang Chiung-Chiu, 2013; Shambaugh, 2011), some interpret this as a strategy of strength based on a Chinese disposition to cooperation.

From this perspective then, China is cast as responsible or irresponsible depending on how closely it is perceived to adhere to play an appropriate role in the maintenance and realisation of the rules and norms of the existing status quo. In other words, China is expected to assume its differentiated role on the world stage and work in cooperation with other states to ensure the smooth running of the international system. According to this view, China knows what is expected of it, and when it fails to meet these expectations it can be said to be acting "irresponsibly." Furthermore, where China does act "irresponsibly" by failing to act to meet given norms (or by blocking others from ensuring that they are maintained) then it is said to carry some culpability for the ensuing disorder and infraction of those norms.

### **China as Responsible Power, Part 2: An Alternative to the Status Quo**

The previous section highlighted commentary which understands China to act responsibly if and when it adheres to established rules and norms. In contrast, there is an alternative line of argument which claims China acts responsibly when it challenges the status quo and tries to establish an alternative – and fairer – set of rules and norms. This idea has a clear precedent in foreign policy of the Mao Zedong era, in which China explicitly aimed to export revolution (see Yeophantong, 2013: 340–42). This position is exemplified by Beijing-based think tank analyst Yuan Peng's declaration that "China, for its part, does not base its notion of international responsibility on U.S. expectations" (quoted in Hachigian and Yuan Peng, 2010: 82).

The accounts discussed in this section portray a Chinese state and civilization whose responsibility it is not to maintain, but to challenge and change, the current world order, and replace it with a better one. However, these accounts fall back on the same understanding of responsibility that has been seen in the approaches they wish to challenge. In these alternative literatures, responsibility is still understood as upholding a set of norms and rules, it is just that these norms are said to be Chinese rather than Western. At the same time, the "Chinese" norms are also said to be universal and good for everybody. Like in the so-called Western discourses that they criticise, the norms being advocated are said to be understood by a group which can represent others – it is just that "international society" has been replaced by a set of elites with distinctly Chinese characteristics.

In this strand of literature, the notion of the status quo is often tightly bound up with ideas of immoral and selfish American leadership (although such accusations have been levelled from different parts of the globe, for numerous reasons, and for a

long time; see Bull, 1979; Dumbrell, 2002: 279). Nevertheless, the claim is exceptionally persistent as a core part of contemporary Chinese international relations scholarship and forms the backdrop against which arguments about a better Chinese alternative are formulated. Some scholars argue that “Chinese assertions of responsibility differ significantly from the so-called ‘China responsibility’ claim currently advocated by Western leaders and scholars, a claim whose primary motivation appears to be restraint and regulation imposed by Western powers” (Wang, 2013: 523). To these thinkers, the “China responsibility” thesis is just another version of the purported “China threat” thesis, designed by a self-interested West to limit Chinese autonomy (Ma Zhengang, 2007: 5–12; cf. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang in Reuters, 2017a).

In other areas the Chinese state’s approach to intervention in cases like Darfur and Syria are said to be guided by its aspiration to “play the role, and cultivate an image, of a ‘responsible great power’” (Lee, Chan, and Chan, 2012: 436). However, responsibility in these cases was long understood in China as standing up *against* rules like R2P. Although China was part of adopting the R2P norm at the UN World Summit meeting in 2005, senior Chinese officials have advocated the notion of “responsible protection” as a Chinese way of contributing to the building of a new and just international political order (Ruan Zongze, 2012: 41). For example, with regards to debates over the application of R2P in Syria, Chinese government representatives used the resolutions passed by the UN in 2013 and 2014 *and* their opposition to the three resolutions that had preceded them to claim that they were acting as a responsible power (Niu Xiaolei, 2014). Then assistant foreign minister Le Yucheng explained: “Being responsible means keeping to principles and saying ‘no’ to what is wrong ... what we need is not just ‘the Responsibility to Protect’ but also ‘responsible protection’” (Xinhua, 2012). The Chinese media defended Chinese opposition to Western interventionism by portraying its supporters as the irresponsible ones. Claiming that the West used wars to distract its public, Li Qingsi (2012) wrote in *China Daily*:

In fact it is the West’s support ... of the Syrian opposition that has led to the prolonged violent unrest in Syria ... As a responsible power, China, in addition to diplomatic mediation, should formulate more practical strategies to respond to Western power practices.

Since then, China has affirmed its position by vetoing Security Council resolutions about Syria (Reuters, 2017b). On this line of thinking, the implementation of rules of the current system (such as the R2P) are thus bound-up with Western, particularly American, self-interest. This represents the “wrong” in opposition to which China is portrayed as responsibly insisting on some other principles. An indication of what these principles are is gained by looking both to what the Chinese political leadership says. Xi Jinping’s “Chinese Dream” slogan sometimes appears to be deployed in a more universalist “win-win” sense, for example when Xi said to President Barack Obama that the “Chinese Dream” incorporates the “American Dream” (Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, 2013: 3, cited in Callahan, 2014b). Yet as part of a more exceptionalist logic Xi also deploys the Chinese Dream rhetoric in a more confrontational manner, stressing that China is a socialist alternative to the liberal capitalist US-led world order (Callahan, 2014b). Chinese scholars have also portrayed the relation between the Chinese Dream and the American Dream in terms of a

contest of opposing values (Hu Shuli, 2013; cf. the discussion of the Chinese and American dreams in Callhan, 2014a).

Whilst government rhetoric is (intentionally) vague about the specifics of its morals and ethics, a somewhat more detailed idea of what principles are involved in the Chinese “alternative” can be constructed by looking at academic discourse. Emerging in conjunction with the government rhetoric of “harmonious world” and the Chinese Dream, but drawing on a legacy of Chinese thought that goes back much further, a growing body of literature is developing that has been described as “harmonist discourses that aim to challenge Western hegemonic discourses and create a new system of governance” (Son, 2012: 400). Going further than most of the discussions of concepts such as “The Beijing Consensus,” “The Chinese Way,” “The Chinese Experience,” or “The China Model,” the harmonist discourses continue “to a rather explicit questioning of the very ‘constitutional structures’ that are the core of the international system” (Carlson, 2010: 96). These are fundamental norms of the “international order” (Reus-Smit, 1999: 14, cited in Carlson 2010, 95; cf. Breslin, 2011). The harmonist discourses appeal to China’s history and culture, and its allegedly superior moral standards that set it apart from the West (Wang, 2013: 525; see also Shi Yinhong, 2009: 5–8).

One influential attempt to articulate these alternative Chinese rules and norms of responsibility can be seen in Yan Xuetong’s theorisation of “hegemonic power” and “humane authority.” Yan explicitly identifies China’s top strategic interest to be the establishment of a “new world order” (Yan Xuetong, 2014: 163) or “new international norms” (Yan Xuetong, 2013: 217, 231). He understands the claims to responsibility, as well as accusations of irresponsibility, to be a significant factor shaping contemporary foreign policy behaviour in China, most recently the shift under Xi’s Chinese Dream from “keeping a low profile” to “striving for achievement” (Yan Xuetong, 2014: 4, 31; see also 2013: 232). For Yan, the current international system was constructed by egocentric hegemons, and especially the US (Yan Xuetong, 1999). The US exemplifies a kind of bad world leader that Yan encapsulates in the Chinese concept *ba* 霸 or *badao* 霸道, which is translated as “hegemony” or “hegemon” (e.g. Yan Xuetong, 2008: 136, 137; 2011, ix, 71), or sometimes as “lord protector” (Yan Xuetong, 2008: 136). *Ba* represents the bad and irresponsible leadership against which the advocated good and responsible Chinese leadership can be contrasted.

To Yan, China’s pre-Qin dynasty thinkers distinguished between *ba*-style power, based mostly on (irresponsible) military and economic force, and *wang* 王 - style authority, based primarily on (responsible) legitimacy and trust. Although Yan argues for an overhaul of international institutions he also taps into the same notion of a “differentiated responsibility system” that maintainers of the status quo also promote (Yan Xuetong, 2013 [2011]: 14–15). Nevertheless, for Yan China should compete with the US for responsibility and establish alternative norms (for example Yan Xuetong, 2010: 290). China can establish new international norms in opposition to liberalism that aim to “transcend” it (Yan Xuetong, 2013: 233). Furthermore, these are popular concepts in the literatures on responsibility and on Chinese international relations more generally. Wider literatures that discuss China’s idea of a “harmonious world” typically contrast it with hegemonism (*baquan zhuyi* 霸权主义), harmony theory with hegemonic stability theory, or hegemonic security (*baquan anquan* 霸权

安全), and Chinese harmonious nationalism with US nationalism as hegemonism (cf. Nordin, 2015: 2016a). All tend to follow the structure that sees responsibility as being linked to the adherence to norms; the only question is *which* – or *whose* – norms.

Another influential example of this line of argument is Zhao Tingyang's elaboration of the concept of *Tianxia* 天下 (Zhao Tingyang, 2005, 2006, 2009; for an example of such influence see Li Baojun and Li Zhiyong, 2008: 84; for critiques see Callahan, 2008; Barabantseva, 2009; and Nordin 2016a, 2016b). *Tianxia* literally translates as "All-under-heaven," but can be variously rendered as "the world" or "empire." It develops ancient Chinese ideas of world order that were supposed to operate more through attraction than coercion. The idea of responsible *Tianxia* is conceptualised in direct opposition to the international state system and in particular "America's disastrous leadership in the world" (Zhao Tingyang, 2009: 6). Zhao maintains that *Tianxia* is "completely different from Western civilisation" and based on a Chinese understanding of inclusivity (Zhou Jianming and Jiao Shixin, 2008: 28). What is needed is a "view from nowhere" (Zhao Tingyang, 2003) which will enable us to "take responsibility for the world as our own responsibility" (Zhao Tingyang, 2005, as translated in Callahan, 2007: 18, and cited in Yeophantong, 2013: 360; see also Zhao Tingyang, 2014). For this to happen contradictions need to be overcome, by turning "the enemy into a friend" and transforming "the bad into the good" through a voluntary process where others emulate the superior Chinese values (Zhao Tingyang, 2006: 34, 36).

The "good" to which all should conform is explicitly arrived at in an anti-democratic manner by both Yan, Zhao, and a majority of scholars that adopt this "alternative Chinese" approach to responsibility. In this line of thought, which is often referred to in the literatures on Chinese responsibility (including Loke, 2009: 203; Yeophantong, 2013), harmonious relationships were traditionally hierarchical relationships. In such a framework, everybody assumed their proper place as well as the responsibilities and duties particular to that position. In the contemporary literatures on responsibility, the responsibility of the ruler is to lead by virtuous example (Yan Xuetong, 2011: 68). The responsibility of those in an inferior position is to follow and obey (see Yeophantong, 2013: 335 ff.). In this manner, both Yan and Zhao imagine responsibility as compliance with a set of norms that are in some form supposed to be universal. Behaving "responsibly" involves "acting in accordance with both the formal and informal rules governing society and its institutions" (Yeophantong, 2013: 334). The difference here is that the rules and norms against which responsibility is measured are those agreed on by a *different* society to that of the West; a society shaped by the Chinese elites that properly understand how to govern All-under-heaven through humane authority. The standard bearer for measuring responsibility may thus be different to that of current status quo maintenance, but the basic idea of responsibility that underpins it is the same: one is responsible if one knows, promotes and protects the rules and norms that order the system and define and dictate one's role.

### **Deconstructing Responsibility**

In what remains of this article, a space is opened for an alternative understanding of responsibility – an understanding which this article suggests connects responsibility to politics not simply as the implementation of a programme of rules, but as a



recognition of intersubjectivity with an emphasis on responding to others (cf. Slater, 1997: 68). This approach has similarities with accounts that draw on ancient Chinese thought to emphasise how responsibility is concerned with relating to those who are different, or “other,” to ourselves. Thus, thinkers such as Zhao might welcome the (re)emphasis on relationships that has been brought to elaborations of responsibility by thinkers such as Derrida. Derrida’s notion of responsibility can help understand the role of China in world politics, and world politics more generally. Derrida claims that responsibility is formed in relation to others who call on us to act responsibly towards them. However, situations where we are called upon to act responsibly – where China is called upon to act responsibly – are almost always characterised by the presence of a number of demands and the impossibility of satisfying them all. In other words, situations are rarely presented where one course of action can lead to only good outcomes for everybody. Two examples can be used to illustrate this. China’s aid programmes and especially the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and China’s potential role in R2P.

The BRI has been seen by many as an effort by the Xi leadership to implement his understanding of China as a responsible great power, by “striving for achievement” on the international stage, rather than biding one’s time. This effort has involved shift to a more active role in rolling out a system of trade, connectivity and cultural exchange under clear Chinese leadership. Domestic debate in China is divided over the extent to which the BRI constitutes an effort to strengthen and improve on the existing international system, or alternatively embodies Xi’s efforts to articulate and alternative set of rules and norms that can grow into a challenge to that status quo. As such, these debates carry on previous domestic debate over China’s aid programmes and other overseas undertakings. Most notably for our argument at this point of the paper, previous domestic controversy has been heightened in debates around the BRI. Advocates of the BRI suggest that it shows China taking on international responsibility and demonstrating its status as a “responsible great power” by enabling development beyond its own borders. At the same time, critics fear that a massive programme of investment abroad comes at the expense of poor Chinese citizens and underdeveloped regions at home. In other words, through the BRI the Xi government is seen by some to shoulder more responsibility for international development and world order, but in doing so to act irresponsibly towards China’s poor. As such, these debates arguably illustrate a common dilemma in Chinese foreign affairs, of choosing between responding to different “others” at the expense of “other others.” Needless to say, such a dilemma is not unique to Chinese foreign relations.

In the case of Syria and R2P, China is called upon by others who demand its protection. However, the response to this call cannot be one of either protecting or not protecting. If UN forces intervene in Syria people will die because of the violence authorised by the rules of R2P, because of the actions of those the UN is fighting, and as an “unintended consequence” of this (such as through the disruption of aid conveys, devastated infrastructure, and so on). If UN forces do not intervene in Syria, people will also die. If what China is called upon to do in the evocations of “responsibility” under R2P is protect people from death, then China will inevitably fail in this “responsibility.” If it responds by protecting some lives, it is neglecting its responsibility to protect the other lives that may be taken in the process.

Furthermore, resources committed in Syria cannot be committed elsewhere, Darfur for example. “This,” as Maja Zehfuss puts it, “is a constant problem: To whose call do we respond? And whom do we end up ignoring?” (Zehfuss, 2009: 146).

It is the impossibility of resolving this dilemma that rests at the heart of Derrida’s account of responsibility. In Derrida’s (1995a: 68) words, “I cannot respond to ... another without sacrificing the other other, the other others.” Thus, an *aporia* is reached where there is no way forward, the path is blocked (Derrida, 2006: 63). This *aporia* is a paradox that lies at the heart of the very idea of responsibility:

As soon as I enter into a relation with the other ... I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me also to respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others (Derrida, 1995a: 68).

If Derrida is right, and it is simply not possible to respond responsibly and ethically to everyone all the time, then the ethics of international responsibility cannot be understood in terms of doing good rather than bad. It is important to note that in this characterisation of responsibility the “responsible” subject is not responsible by virtue of any action that they have taken, or not taken. It thus departs, radically, from older meanings of responsibility which connected it to infringement of the rights of others, or the failure to perform prescribed actions. Whilst not necessarily choosing a given situation, nevertheless Derrida maintains that we are responsible for it. On this view, responsibility does not begin when we have chosen our conditions, or when we can easily apply moral rules. Derridian responsibility is nothing to do with owing a debt because of our past actions or omissions. Responsibility begins with an encounter with the other in situations that neither of us “choose.”

A positive ethical outcome, accordingly, cannot be reduced to China’s internalisation of, and compliance with, the purported rules and norms of international society, as Loke and others would have it (Loke, 2009: 2016). Instead, the question of ethics or justice arises precisely in the experience of *aporia*, “moments in which the decision between just and unjust is never insured by a rule” (Derrida, 1992a: 16). This means that we need to make a decision – that Chinese people or authorities need to make a decision – in the context of profound uncertainty about what is the right thing to do (Derrida, 1995b: 273; Derrida, 2003: 118). Derrida’s point is deceptively simple, but it runs counter to the account that prioritises following rules. If the path is clear, rules and norms mean that the correct course of action is obvious, then it makes no sense at all to speak of “responsibility.” If what China (or some other actor) needs to do is pre-ordained there is no need to make a decision – the actor need only apply the rules or implement the programme. It might be said that this attitude is the ultimate irresponsibility, a pretence that there is no real choice, no contradictory demands, no uncertainty. Generalised rules of “justice” or “ethics” inevitably fail to do justice to the singularity of an event. Therefore, “far from ensuring responsibility, the generality of ethics [as conventionally understood] incites irresponsibility” (Derrida, 1995a: 61). It also eschews politics which is predicated not on certainty but uncertainty, and the encounter with others rather than the compliance with rules.

It is difficult to do what Derrida asks: to both respond to the other and to recognise that such a response has no foundation or certainty, and simultaneously fails to respond to the “other others” (Derrida, 1992b: 79). It is difficult to accept that knowledge, calculation and rules will not guarantee justice, ethics, or responsibility. Certainly, we should contemplate principles and try to be as informed as we can, but ultimately knowledge and principles are not enough and cannot provide us with the “responsible” choice (cf. Zehfuss, 2007). Importantly, as E. Jeffrey Popke (2003: 307) puts it, “to assert that the decision is ultimately undecidable does not mean that there can be no such thing as truth, right or good. It means, rather, that if we purport to know in advance the specific content of such notions, then the event of the decision is divested of its political content,” as though it was deduced by a calculating machine (Derrida, 1999: 240). Such a machine follows the rules it has been set. A part of the political condition is realising that we establish norms and set rules without foundations. This does not mean we can never act and never order our collective world, but it does mean that all action is provisional and necessarily fails to respond to all the calls upon us. Responsibility “affirms the necessity to judge, to analyze, to make decisions, in the context of an event that is conditioned by our inexhaustible responsibility to the other” (Popke, 2003: 307; see also Derrida, 1997: 18). Such a judgement and decision in response to the other is political. Thus, an important point about this decision is that we are not somehow isolated and autonomous in our decision making. Rather, when we respond to the world around us, to others, that world and those others are profoundly implicated in our decision, to the point where Derrida writes of “the Other’s decision in me, or through me” (Derrida, 2006: 103). In this sense, the decisions that China makes in response to others’ demands are not simply or straightforwardly under China’s control. We could even say – to Xia Liping’s approval, perhaps – that the decisions “China” makes are never purely “China’s.”

### Conclusion

From the debates reviewed in this article, it is clear that there is a diversity of opinion in existing discussions on China as a responsible power. Some understand China’s duties in absolute terms, whereas others focus on their distribution based on relative power and position. Some describe or even advocate an inward-looking attitude to responsibility, whereas others argue China can and will be more outwardly proactive. It has been shown how the debates on Chinese responsibility are cast in terms of a dichotomisation of change and continuity, where “responsible great power” behaviour means to either support or resist the rules and norms that uphold the current international system. As a result, actors in the West and US have often been highly critical of what is understood as Chinese irresponsibility. China is “irresponsible” because it should recognise the existing rules and norms, and it is capable of following them – but it chooses not to.

This article has argued that both the revisionist and the status quo strands of responsibility thought, that point to one another as irresponsible, can be criticised for a similar politics of domination, imperialism or hegemonism. Both fall back on an understanding of responsibility as the compliance with some set of rules and norms that are supposed to be universal or agreed upon in society. In one case they tend to refer to “international society,” (a euphemism for Western elites); in the other case they tend to refer to the “humane authority” of *Tianxia* (a euphemism for Chinese

elites). Both arguments fall back on the same underlying notion of responsibility as “acting in accordance with both the formal and informal rules governing society and its institutions” (Yeophantong, 2013: 334). Large portions of both strands of literature also fall back on a notion of differentiated responsibility, where appropriate responsibility can be judged and described in advance by accurately measuring the PRC’s capabilities and position. Once one has accurate information about these capabilities, one will be able to refer to principles that can indicate what precise actions would constitute appropriately responsible behaviour.

In relation to such dominant notions of responsibility, this article has suggested entertaining a different understanding. Drawing on the thought of Derrida, a construction of responsibility that sees it as the opposite of compliance with established rules and norms has been developed. On this view it only makes sense to speak of responsibility in the context of radical uncertainty. An “ethics of international responsibility,” to pursue Loke’s term, needs to acknowledge the undecidable nature of the choices China faces, or else it falls back into irresponsibility. Yeophantong (2013: 364) concludes her investigation of the historical evolution of responsibility in China by arguing that “tensions undeniably surface between Chinese and Western conceptions of responsibility and corresponding approaches to global governance, as well as between domestic and international understandings.” These tensions revolve around what is to be done by whom. It can be added that tensions equally undeniably surface between different Western concepts, and between different Chinese concepts. Different systems offer different priorities; different systems respond to some and neglect others. However, such tensions should not be understood as something that makes responsibility impossible. Rather, it is precisely these tensions that point to the deeper idea of responsibility: that we must always act without ultimate justification, and in choosing some we neglect others.

What are the effects of thinking through a Derridean understanding of responsibility? In contrast to the view that responsibility is about rule compliance, the possibility of making simple and categorical judgements of right and wrong is lost. Lost, too, is the possibility of a stable knowledge of what constitutes responsible behaviour. Even the possibility of being responsible in a complete and absolute sense is lost. What is gained is perhaps the possibility of being responsible at all (rather than executing a programme which in effect has nothing to do with responsibility). Arguably, also regained is the *politics* of speaking of China as a responsible power. As Zehfuss puts it, “the aporia of the undecidable does not make responsibility impossible; depoliticisation, which turns ethical questions into technical problems awaiting technical solutions determined by pre-given rules, does” (Zehfuss, 2009: 147, with reference to Derrida, 1992b: 71–2). In Chinese assessments of whose demand is urgent to respond to, there is also a new need for political commitment. As Derrida might put it:

For such assessment, there is, by definition, no pre-existing criterion or absolute calculability; analysis *must begin* anew every day everywhere, without ever being guaranteed by prior knowledge. It is on this condition, on the condition constituted by this injunction, that there is, *if* there is, action, decision and political responsibility – repoliticization (Derrida, 1999: 240, emphasis in original).

Perhaps a different way of approaching the notion of China as a responsible power is then to steer away from the exclusive focus on established rules and norms as a standard-bearer for measuring such responsibility. The attempt to eliminate the radical undecidability, the *aporia*, from China's decisions about what kind of power to be is precisely what eliminates responsibility itself. If responsibility is to be possible, the *aporia* must remain (Derrida, 1995a: 66). Indeed, it *does* remain, and denying it is a refusal of the responsibility that recognising it would place on all states including China. Denying responsibility by equating it to following rules is also an eschewing the very ground on which a politics can be based.

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