

From "socialism" to "harmonious society," the concept of "society" in all its ramifications has figured prominently in Chinese discourse for well over a century. "Society" is a key concept in modern Chinese history. In fact, it has been so omnipresent as to appear all but commonplace. While social problems and the shaping of society have been extensively debated, the concept itself has seemed so self-evident that it was beyond discussion: of course, there *is* a Chinese society, there always has been.¹ The unassailability of this basic tenet has been the very precondition for the discourse of society. Yet a closer look suggests that the matter is not quite so simple. As late as 1919, Fu Sinian maintained that

the Chinese people have crowds, but they have no society; moreover they enjoy life in a crowd, but they do not enjoy life in society; they feel comfortable living in a crowd, but they feel uncomfortable living in society.²

This somewhat cynical statement may serve as a reminder that "society" is not a pre-ordained (which, paradoxically, would mean: pre-social) entity that is simply there. Rather, it is a *concept*, and a recent one at that.³ "The conceptualization of the 'social' as a discrete realm of activities, as Hannah Arendt reminded us, was a sign of the modern age."⁴ In pre-Meiji Japan, "there was no word that corresponded to *society*,"⁵ and in Europe, it was only "following the replacement of traditional society by modern society that people began to use the word 'society' to designate the organizational form in which they lived."⁶ Similarly, the Chinese concept for "society" is not much more than a century old. Until at least the late 19th century, Chinese society did not conceive of itself as "society." "Society," then, is itself a social artifact, contingent upon the society that maintains it.

As this article will argue, it was not just the response to Western imperialism that gave rise to the concept, nor was it simply a matter of translating Western terms; rather, it was the transition from a traditional, stratified society to a modern, functionally differentiated society that made the concept plausible, even necessary. "Whether a nation adopts or rejects the usage of certain words always depends

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- 1 For studies that do not take this for granted but rather treat "society" as a concept, cf. Tsin 1997, and the authoritative article Jin and Liu 2008 (first published 2001). While the present article offers a rather different argument, it owes inspiration and many references to these two studies.
 - 2 Fu Sinian 1919, 29 [1579]: 中國人有羣眾無社會，並且歡喜羣眾的生活，不歡喜社會的生活，覺得羣眾的生活舒服，社會的生活不舒服。On this essay, cf. Wang Fan-shen 1997, 270–273.
 - 3 In this article, I will use quotation marks for "society" as a concept and omit them when discussing Chinese society as if it were an ontological entity.
 - 4 Tsin 1997, 213–214, referring to Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958), 38–49.
 - 5 Yanabu 1991, 21, who argues that this was so "because Japan simply did not possess a reality equivalent to *society*."
 - 6 Jin and Liu 2008, 181. In Europe, the term acquired its modern sense in the 19th century. As late as 1856, Lorenz von Stein remarked "daß es bisher noch gar keinen Begriff von der Gesellschaft gibt" (quoted in Riedel 1975b, 843). Similarly, Luhmann 2000, 8, notes: "im 18./19. Jahrhundert [...] fehlte außerdem, und fehlt genau besehen immer noch, ein Begriff für das umfassende System der Gesellschaft. An dessen Stelle fungierte in der alten Ordnung ein auf den Menschen als Naturwesen bezogener Gattungsbegriff. [...]. Es ist ganz unmöglich, einen für unsere Zeit plausiblen Begriff der Gesellschaft in diese Denkwelt zurückzuprojizieren."

on its internal factors,” as Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng have remarked.⁷ In late Qing China, the crumbling of hierarchical divisions and the idea of equality produced a sense of cohesion that transcended all social groups: thus, for the first time, “society” became conceivable. At the same time, it became increasingly evident that this “society” was made up of very unequal parts that were not easily integrated. Within this tension between affinity and disparity, the Chinese concept of “society” developed.

It acquired its terminology with the introduction of Western sociology, especially with Yan Fu’s 嚴復 (1854–1921) translation of Herbert Spencer’s *Study of Sociology* that began in 1898. The word that Yan Fu chose to translate “society” was *qun* 羣. Roughly at the same time, sociological theories were received via Japan, where a reception of Western sociology had already occurred several decades earlier. In this context, the word used for “society” was *shehui* 社會, a loanword derived from the Japanese word *shakai*. As this article will demonstrate, *shehui* was not just a whimsical adoption of Japanese usage without further significance. A decisive shift in usage from *qun* to *shehui* is observable around the years 1903/1904,⁸ and this shift seems to correspond to a change in the concept of “society” itself.

It is this development that the present article describes. The questions it raises are: How and why did the concept of “society” appear in China? Why did it become necessary? How and under what circumstances did it change? What made it seem convincing and reasonable? In a word: What made Chinese society describe itself as a “society”? Tracing the emergence and evolution of the concept, this article describes the disintegration of the old order and its conceptual framework and then outlines the discourse of “society” that first centered around the word *qun*, before discussing the decisive change in the concept associated with the spread of the word *shehui*.

The Crumbling of the Old Order

In his introductory chapter to the *Cambridge History* volume on the Late Qing Dynasty, John K. Fairbank outlines an “old order” that prevailed in China until well into the 19th century. He quotes the assumption that the “old society” had created “an effective and balanced structure of ideas and practices” that contributed to China’s “stability, her capacity to maintain a steady state almost like the homeostasis of physiology.” “The result,” Fairbank maintains, “was a tremendous inertia or persistence in established ways, a tendency to change only within tradition.”⁹ As a description of general history, this statement has been superseded by a host of more recent studies that have highlighted the extent of social change in imperial China. However, on the level of *conceptual* history, it remains valid: whereas Chinese society itself had been in a state of flux at least since the Tang-Song transition, its self-description as a hierarchical, coherent and stable order remained unchanged. The term that encapsulated this old order was *simin* 四民, the “four estates.”¹⁰

There are four estates of people: first the scholars, second the peasants, third the artisans, and fourth the merchants. In regard to their comportment, scholars are venerable while peasants, artisans, and merchants are despicable. In regard to their occupation, peasants are fundamental while artisans and merchants are peripheral.¹¹

7 Jin and Liu 2008, 176–177.

8 Cf. Jin and Liu 2008, 176, and, for a graphic illustration of word frequencies, 190.

9 Fairbank 1978, 6.

10 This translation would seem to be more meaningful than the common “four classes of people.” Insofar as *simin* means social distinctions based on occupational criteria that are hereditary, all but immutable and necessary for social order, the term corresponds to the “estates” of pre-modern Europe. “Class,” on the other hand, is a term I will reserve for the quite different concept of *jieji*.

Their hierarchical order defined the structure of society; it was “the bedrock of the state,” as the *Guanzi* puts it, which could not be removed;¹² “if the four estates of people are balanced, the royal way flourishes and the hundred clans are at peace.”¹³ The fictive model of the *simin* became the mantra of political thinkers throughout the imperial age.¹⁴ It was not simply one of several options for conceiving social order, but the sole correct order for which there was no alternative, “an immutable, eternal pattern for all ages”¹⁵ that had been in place since time immemorial.

Simin would seem to have been the conceptual precursor of “society.” However, as a concept it was quite unlike “society” insofar as it described the parts but not the integrated whole. There was no abstraction denoting the ensemble that united the different estates of people.¹⁶ In fact, the very concept of *simin* effectively precluded the conceptualization of such an ensemble, since it stressed the *separation* of the “four estates.” Scholars, peasants, artisans, and merchants were to stay apart by all means, socially, in space and in time: “Scholars’ sons will always be scholars, peasants’ sons will always be peasants, artisans’ sons will always be artisans, and merchants’ sons will always be merchants.”¹⁷ There was no concept that expressed the overarching social system that united them, in short: there was no concept of “society.”

However, the “immutable, eternal pattern” of the *simin* became increasingly precarious by late imperial times. The process may be traced to the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, whose founding emperor Taizu (r. 1368–1398) found it necessary to decree that

agriculture and sericulture are the foundation of clothing and sustenance. Sufficient sustenance depends on the prohibition of peripheral activities. Let it be clear throughout the empire that the four estates of people must each tend their own trade, and that unproductive commoners are not permitted to wear brocade and embroidered clothes.¹⁸

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- 11 Xie Jieshu 謝階樹 (1778–1825), “Baofu” 保富 (*Yueshu* 約書 8; quoted from Chen Xuliang 2005, 97): 凡民有四，一曰士，二曰農，三曰工，四曰商。論民之行，以士為尊，農工商為卑。論民之業，以農為本，工商為末。
 - 12 *Guanzi* 管子 8.20, 188: 桓公曰：「定民之居，成民之事，奈何？」管子對曰：「士、農、工、商四民者，國之石民也。不可使雜處，雜處則其言囂，其事亂。 Cf. the translation by Rickett 1985, 325. This self-description is not to be confused with social reality. In fact, the term *simin* seems to have been coined precisely because scholars, farmers, artisans and merchants were beginning to intermingle: this is why *Guanzi* stresses that they should not mix.
 - 13 *Shuoyuan* 說苑 7, 172: 春秋曰：四民均則王道興而百姓寧，所謂四民者，士農工商也。 Cf. the translation in Stumpfeldt 2011, vol. 2, 287.
 - 14 The fictitious character of the model hardly needs to be stressed; just like the “three estates” in European history, it was a “semantic artifact” (Luhmann 1997, 703, who also quotes Roland Mousnier’s assessment: “une fiction commode pour obtenir le paiement des impôts”). However, the blatant discrepancy between the *simin* model and actual social structure does deserve special note. It entirely omits the military as well as the “despicable people” 賤民 at the bottom of the social ladder, and also the hereditary nobility (not to mention the emperor) at its top. Arguably, the concept of *simin* served not to describe but to camouflage social reality.
 - 15 Xihuang xizhou 1873: 有聖人者出，視被羽毛穴居之民教之以火食粒食而民始知有生之樂矣，猶慮生之無以養之，養之無以教之焉，故設為士農工商四科以區別之，此萬古不易之常法也。
 - 16 The term *min*, “the people,” does not seem to qualify, since it is simply “a general term that both collectivizes its members and enables an enumeration of them as groups or individuals,” whereas “society” is an abstraction that goes one step further in that it renames the people as a distinct unity with its own conditions of integration” (Howland 2002, 170, referring to the Japanese term).
 - 17 Anon. 1883: 士之子恒為士，農之子恒為農，工之子恒為工，商之子恒為商。
 - 18 *Mingshi jishi benmo* 14, 218 (edict from 1385): 農桑衣食之本，足食在于禁末作，足衣在于禁華靡。申明天下，四民各守其業，不許游食庶民衣錦繡。 This passage is not to be found in *Ming shilu* nor in *Mingshi*.

While this sounds like a forceful affirmation of the traditional order, the very fact that it needed to be *stressed* in Ming times indicates that this self-description of society was no longer beyond dispute.¹⁹ In fact, it seems to have been enforced the more rigidly the less it corresponded to social structure. As Timothy Brook observes,

the formula began to be used in the middle of the dynasty in a more anxious fashion, sometimes with a quiet warning about how things everywhere should be, but no longer were. Thus, the 1506 gazetteer of Daming, Bei Zhili, says of the prefectural capital that “the gentry know to orient themselves to study, the peasantry know to devote themselves to agriculture, and the merchants, while adept at trading, do not go beyond their station.” Phrases such as this go back two thousand years in Chinese statecraft writing: their revival must indicate that conventions regarding occupational distinctions were being flouted, and that the gentry elite felt moved to admonish those who did so, especially merchants elsewhere who were going beyond their station.²⁰

Some authors were quite outspoken about this. The celebrated *guwen* writer Gui Youguang 歸有光 (1507–1571) noted that “in antiquity, the four estates of people had different functions, but in later times scholars have become mixed up with peasants and merchants.”²¹ And the literary scholar He Liangjun 何良俊 (1506–1573) remarked that “formerly, those who pursued mean (activities, i.e., trade) were still few, but now those who leave farming and turn to be artisans and merchants are three times as many as before.”²²

Increasingly, the old order seemed out of kilter. Social mobility had undermined any stable distinctions and hierarchical structures there might have been. Whereas formerly, the scholars held the unassailable lead in the hierarchy, their position now became contested. Thus the dramatist and general Wang Daokun 汪道昆 (1525–1593) from Huizhou remarked that “in ancient times, scholars were honored above merchants, but in my prefecture merchants are honored above scholars.”²³ It seems safe to say that this was not only the case in the merchant capital Huizhou: merchants rose in the social hierarchy, and there was no denying their elevated status.

Now some scholars resorted to a new line of reasoning: they argued that the four estates of people adhered to the same overall principle. This was suggested by the scholar official Li Mengyang 李夢陽 (1473–1529), who stated that “merchants and scholars have different crafts but the same mind.”²⁴ And it was famously expressed by Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1528):

19 Sure enough, the above-quoted characterization as an “eternal pattern” responded to a suggestion to subvert the *simin* hierarchy by turning scholars into peasants in order to strengthen the latter; cf. Jiyue shanfang gu’anzi 霽月山房古庵子, “Simin lun” 四民論 (*Shenbao* 216, 1873/01/07).

20 Twitchett and Mote 1998, 699–700 (transcription modified). The author notes that “increasingly, through the sixteenth century, gazetteer compilers elsewhere make similar pronouncements on the four orders within their districts.”

21 “Bai’an weng bashi shou xu” 白庵程翁八十壽序 (*Zhenchuan xiansheng ji* 13, 319): 古者四民異業，至於後世而士與農商常相混。Cf. also Tang Lixing 1997, 41, Chen Xuewen 2011, 109, and Twitchett and Mote 1998, 700).

22 *Siyou zhai congshuo* 13, 112: 昔日逐末之人尚少。今去農而改業為工商者。三倍於前矣。He Liangjun specifically identifies the Jiajing period (from 1522 onward) as the time when the order of the *simin* began to deteriorate.

23 “Ming gu chushi Xiyang Wu Zhanggong muzhiming” 明故處士饒陽吳長公墓志銘 (*Taihan ji* 太函集 54; quoted from Chen Xuewen 2011, 109): 古時右儒而左賈，吾郡或右賈而左儒。蓋拙者力不足於賈去而為儒，贏者才不足於儒而歸賈，此其大抵也。

24 “Ming gu Wang Wenxian muzhiming” 明故王文顯墓志銘 (*Kongtong ji* 空同集 44; quoted from Chen Xuewen 2011, 109): 文顯嘗訓諸子曰：夫商與士異術而同心，故善商者處財賈之場而修高明之行，是故雖利而不汙，善士者引先王之經而絕實利之徑，是故必名而有成，故利以義制，名以清修，各守其業，天之鑒也，如此則子孫必昌身安而家肥矣。

Of old, the four estates of people have had different occupations but the same principle. Their wholehearted devotion to it was one and the same. Scholars cultivate order, peasants provide nourishment, artisans refine instruments, and merchants transport goods. They each aim for what is within their endowment and capabilities, striving to devote themselves wholeheartedly. Essentially, it all comes down to the principle of benefiting the livelihood of the people: in this, they are one and the same.²⁵

This was a significant shift in the concept of the *simin*. It amounted to abandoning the built-in hierarchy, acknowledging that merchants, artisans, and peasants were on an equal level with scholars.²⁶ But while this theoretical concession reshuffled the order of the *simin*, it managed to keep the concept itself intact: "society" *avant la lettre* was still a pre-ordained order made up of four more or less distinct estates, albeit united by the same basic principle. The traditional worldview was shaken, but it was still standing.

The concept of the *simin* as being distinct but on equal footing, as it were, seems to have remained convincing until well into Qing times – witness an edict by emperor Yongzheng (r. 1722–1735):

I regard the people and the merchants as belonging to one body. Scholars, peasants, artisans and merchants, although they each have different occupations, are all part of the state's cherished people, and naturally ought to be regarded as one.²⁷

Chinese emperors had come a long way since Ming Taizu. While the latter had sternly reaffirmed the segregation of the four estates of people, Yongzheng openly acknowledged that they could no longer be separated. This acknowledgment was tantamount to questioning the entire stratified society: if the *simin* were no longer segregated, they no longer were the *simin*, as the poet Ling Yangzao 凌揚藻 (1760–1845) noted:

[Today's] scholars are no longer scholars that adhere to antiquity. The contesting, hurried, degenerate, and crafty [artisans] and the aggressive and monopolizing [merchants] are no longer artisans and merchants that adhere to antiquity. Only the peasants [...] have not changed to this day.²⁸

The issue that had been simmering since Ming times came to a boiling point in the late 19th century. In 1895, the Qing had suffered an ignominious defeat in the war with Japan. Three decades of technological and military "self-strengthening" (*zhiqiang*) had proved an utter failure. Now it became obvious that economic and technological backwardness were not at the core of the Qing Empire's problems, but China's very social structure. Especially between 1895 and 1905, social mobility accelerated in a way that not just shook but effectively shattered the old order.²⁹ Not even Wang

25 "Jie'an Fanggong mubiao (yiyong)" 節菴方公墓表 (乙酉) (*Wang Yangming quanji* 25, 941): 古者四民異業而同道，其盡心焉一也。士以修治，農以具養，工以利器，商以通貨，各就其資之所近，力之所及者而業焉，以求盡其心。其歸要在於有益於生人之道，則一而已。The text continues: 士農以其盡心於修治具養者，而利器通貨，猶其士與農也；工商以其盡心於利器通貨者，而修治具養，猶其工與商也。故曰：四民異業而同道。Cf. also Chen Xuewen 2011, 109.

26 For earlier such tendencies in Tang and Wudai literature, cf. Chen Hongying 2008.

27 *Qing wenxian tongkao* 清文獻通考 28, 426 (edict of 1723): 朕視民商皆屬一體。士農工商雖各異業，皆係國家子民，理當一視。Note the expression "one body": the thought of the *simin* being on equal standing of sorts entails the notion of their overarching unity which was later to be conceptualized as "society."

28 *Lishao bian* 蠡勺編 26, 271: 士已非復古之士矣。競趨淫巧爭相壟斷亦非復古之工商矣。惟農夫者 [...] 至于今不改。It is only logical that in the same essay, Ling questions the pre-ordained nature of the *simin*: 夫天地生人之始豈有所謂士農工商者哉。

29 Cf. Zhang Jian's observation that "in the last ten years things have changed more than in a whole century," quoted in Bastid-Bruguiere 1980, 535. A certain Yuchen zi 雨塵子 (*Xinmin congbao* 28; quoted from Jin and Liu 2008, 194)

Yangming's sleight of reasoning could harmonize it any longer: the fiction that the *simin* were essentially "one and the same" had lost its credibility. "It was certainly not pure chance," as Marianne Bastid-Bruguere notes, "that so many educated Chinese at the end of the nineteenth century deplored the disappearance of *yixin*, the union or unity of hearts."³⁰ In the eyes of contemporary observers, the distance between different social groups seemed to have increased to an unprecedented degree. "Our scholarship is incompatible, our dispositions and emotions do not match, our hearts and souls are worlds apart, and it is a thousand miles from face to face," Tang Caichang 唐才常 (1867–1900) lamented;³¹ Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) deplored the fact that not only "families are separated from others, and villages, counties and provinces are separated from one another," but also that "provinces are separated from one another, and Manchu and Han go by different names."³² Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 (1865–1898) diagnosed a growing rift between different strata of society:

Rulers and ministers are separated, high and low ministers are separated, officials and the gentry are separated, the high and the low gentry are separated, the low gentry and the people are separated; and even among officials, high gentry, low gentry, and the people, mutual separations are ubiquitous.³³

The possibility of "the four estates of people disintegrating"³⁴ was becoming very real. Society became increasingly "separated," as Tan Sitong put it, or rather, to use a sociological term, differentiated. In fact, the most momentous divisions arguably were not those between high and low, nor those between regions, families, or ethnic groups. Rather, it was the differentiation that isolated different social systems from one another. What Tan Sitong and his contemporaries witnessed – though they still lacked the vocabulary to describe it – was the transition from a stratified society to a society characterized by *functional differentiation*.³⁵

After the middle of the 19th century, the structure of Chinese society had changed radically. The number of academic title-holders, including those with purchased titles, grew dramatically, intensifying competition, local disparities, and fractional struggles within the elite. At the same time, new elites were emerging. Military leaders increasingly took over civil posts and wielded independent power as local strongmen; the reputations of experts in Western learning, interpreters, technicians, and engineers grew considerably; businessmen became highly influential; intellectuals, including

wrote in 1903 that society (!) had changed more in the past 100 years than ever before: 社會之變革，未有若近白餘年者也。Fu Sinian, writing in 1919 (*Fu Sinian quanji*, vol. 5, 30), still complained about social mobility: 一個人今天作買賣，明天作起官來了，去年當工程師，今年當政客了。[...]。這是社會組織的系統缺乏秩序的一端。

30 Bastid-Bruguere 1980, 593 (transcription modified). The author argues that the "absenteeism of landowners, which was the corollary of the urbanization of the elite, [...] directed a blow at a central notion in the working of Chinese society, the *ganqing*, that is, the sense of reciprocity in human relations, or, rather, a feeling of mutual acceptance and individual duty among people of differing conditions."

31 Tang Caichang 1898: 吾人羣萃州處。尚且術業不通，性情不洽。肝膽胡越。觀面千里。

32 Kang Youwei 1898: 民既不預國事，惟知身家親族而已。餘皆外視。故其甚者，姓與姓分，鄉與鄉分，縣與縣分，省與省分。[...]。令省與省分界，滿與漢異名，務在削大使小，汰多使寡。多立彼疆此界之名，以薄其扶助親愛之意。 Elsewhere, Kang Youwei praised the Meiji Restoration's "Charter Oath" for having abolished "the divisions between high and low" (cf. Zarrow 2012, 44).

33 Tan Sitong, "Tong qing" 94: 君與臣隔，大臣與小臣隔，官與紳隔，紳與士隔，士與民隔，而官與官，紳與紳，士與士，民與民，又無不自相為隔。

34 *Qingshi gao* 445, 12468–12469 (memorial by Wenti 文憚): 設使四民解體，大盜生心，藉此以集聚匪徒，招誘黨羽，因而犯上作亂，未知康有為又何以善其後？

35 On functional differentiation, cf. Luhmann 1977, and Luhmann 1984.

journalists, professional politicians, and revolutionaries, rose to become opinion leaders; an urban society developed that included factory owners, compradors, merchants, bankers, managers, and other professionals whose worldview and lifestyle differed significantly from traditional norms; a proletariat appeared whose way of life deviated radically from that of the rural populace as well as that of middle-class townsmen; and degree holders who engaged in business became so prominent as to form an entirely new social stratum of "gentry-merchants" (*shenshang* 紳商).³⁶

These new "separations" were quite different from the time-honored hierarchy of the *simin*. They were not primarily hierarchical at all but *heterarchical*. Different spheres of society now each followed their own rationale, without adhering to one collectively binding set of ideas or rules. There no longer was one moral order, as Liang Qichao observed in 1901:

Society has rejected the Three Bonds and suppressed all conventions and formalities, but it has not yet been able to explore a new morality to replace these: this is a transitional period concerning ideals and customs.³⁷

In Europe, this situation had been diagnosed in similar terms by Émile Durkheim just a few years before:

Des changements profonds se sont produits, et en très peu de temps, dans la structure de nos sociétés ; elles se sont affranchies du type segmentaire avec une rapidité et dans des proportions dont on ne trouve pas un autre exemple dans l'histoire. Par suite, la morale qui correspond à ce type social a régressé, mais sans que l'autre se développât assez vite pour remplir le terrain que la première laissait vide dans nos consciences.³⁸

Just as Durkheim's *solidarité mécanique* had deteriorated, the hierarchical and perfectly consistent order of the *simin* was lost, and it was not coming back. Instead of a stratified order with a clearly defined apex, society was increasingly structured by functionally defined social systems – government, scholarship, mass media, military, economy, law – that operated independently of and parallel to one another. The fault lines of society no longer ran between high and low but between fundamentally different worldviews.

No longer could the neat fiction of the *simin* be upheld, nor even the ideal of a hierarchical order. Instead, social inequality came to be regarded as a serious problem. Of course, the old order was also characterized by inequality, and in fact was unequal by its very nature. The crucial difference was that these inequalities were legitimized by the social structure itself: the *simin* were a pre-ordained order, instituted by the sage kings of antiquity and authorized by an unquestionable tradition. To criticize inequality would have amounted to criticizing an order to which there was no alternative. This is why disapproval was only possible "as moral criticism concerning factual behavior, not as structural criticism and not as the hope for a non-stratified society."³⁹

36 Cf. Bastid-Bruguiere 1980. The author repeatedly stresses the divisions among and within these groups: "Owing to its irregular distribution, the swelling of the official elite accentuated regional disparities" (p. 538). "The increase in numbers of the scholar class strained its cohesion and accentuated the differences, and even opposition, between title-holders" (p. 539). "The military had no real unity. Its origins were disparate, its training diverse, and numerous were the forces which divided it" (p. 546). On the *shenshang*, cf. He Yuefu 1994. For a similar account of how in Japan, "during the early nineteenth century, the bonds that had shaped the nation's status groups into a coherent whole began to fray" as a result of commerce and urban growth, cf. Nakai and McClain 1991 (quote: 593).

37 Anon. 1901a: 社會既厭三綱廢抑虛文縟節之俗，而未能研究新道德以代之，是理想風俗上之過渡時代也。Cf. the similar diagnosis in Anon. 1906: 舊道德將廢而新道德未興也。

38 Durkheim 1960, 405.

39 Luhmann 1985, 151. Cf. *ibid.* for the following argument.

But with the shift to functional differentiation, inequality ceased to be constitutive of social structure itself. Stratification, cutting across functional differentiation, as it were, now appeared at odds with the dominant social order, and thus began to lose its legitimation. As a consequence, inequality could be criticized and the demand for *equality* and the social inclusion of large parts of the people became tenable.⁴⁰ Functionally defined social systems could not be ranked in a hierarchical order; moreover, social rank could no longer be a criterion for social integration within these systems, which are universal in their scope: they potentially include everybody, high or low, insofar as they contribute to the operation of the system. What counts in economic transactions is the ability to pay; within scholarship, truth claims are crucial; mass media are all about interesting stories; for legal arguments, the criteria of right and wrong are decisive; and in politics, access to power is the clincher – but in no case is social rank a criterion for in- or exclusion.

The “divisions” between high and low did not befit the modernizing Chinese society. The new ideal was an order in which “scholars, peasants, workers, and merchants, the four major professions, are all equal without distinguishing their importance or esteem.”⁴¹ Now, for the first time, that sense of cohesion that transcends all social groups gained currency in intellectual circles – in other words, the concept of Chinese “society” appeared on the horizon.

The most prominent champion of equality and universal inclusion was certainly Kang Youwei. He was among the first to advocate women’s rights, and in 1898, he famously proposed the people’s right to submit memorials (*xumin shangshu*) as well as a “cooperative government of ruler and people.”⁴² Social integration, according to Kang, was the key to becoming a strong nation.

I believe that what makes every country in the East and the West strong is neither the excellence of its government nor the quality of its military and artillery. It is the fact that in the entire country the ruler and the people unite to form one body without diverging minds. To unite millions of people into one single body and to unite millions of people’s minds into one single mind: that is truly the pinnacle of strength and greatness.⁴³

If China’s problem lay in the traumatic loss of “the unity of hearts,” which had supposedly characterized the old order, restoring this unity was considered the most important political task of all. If only this basic unity could be achieved, everything else would fall into place. Clearly, a return to the old fiction of the *simin*, which stressed division rather than unity, was no longer tenable. Instead, a new order was called for. There was no lack of proposals for regaining the lost unity. Among the most

40 Simultaneously, the neo-Confucian tradition that symbolized the stratified order came under attack, and new interest in other schools of thought arose, as pointed out by Chang 1987: “A major indigenous development in this period was the revival of interest in classical Mohism. In certain intellectual circles, the parallel between parts of the Mo Tzu and Western logic as well as the physical sciences aroused great interest and even made studying the ancient text a sort of fad” (p. 9). Another “important evolution in the Chinese tradition in the late nineteenth century was the renaissance of interest in the classical non-canonical philosophies, the so-called chu-tzu hsüeh” (p. 10). Moreover, “the late nineteenth century also witnessed a revival of Mahayana Buddhism, which took place not so much among Buddhist monks as among lay intellectuals” (p. 12).

41 *Dagong bao* 大公報 1902/11/20 (quoted from Chen Xuliang 2005, 84): 士農工商, 四大營業者, 皆平等也, 無輕重貴賤之殊。

42 Kang Youwei 1898: 為中國計而求其治本, 惟有君民合治, 滿漢不分而已。定其治本以為國是, 乃可以一人心而求治理。

43 Kang Youwei 1898: 竊惟東西各國之所以致強者, 非其政治之善軍兵砲械之精也。在其舉國君民合為一體無有二心也。夫合數千百萬之人為一身, 合數千百萬人心為一心, 其强大至矣。

prominent were Kang Youwei's utopian design of a "Great Unity" (*datong* 大同), a radically egalitarian community without a state, private property, or family;⁴⁴ or Tan Sitong's concept of "humaneness" (*ren* 仁), which he explains in the following manner:

The first office of humaneness is interconnection. [...]. Interconnection is manifested through equality. [...]. Equality is an expression of ultimate unity. If there is unity, there is interconnection; if there is interconnection, there is humaneness.⁴⁵

The most successful of these formulas, however, was encapsulated in a new concept that now appeared on the intellectual scene: *qun* 羣, loosely translated as "community." Liang Qichao supported this concept in no uncertain terms:

There is no better principle than community, and no worse principle than solitude. [...]. Community brings about interconnection, interconnection brings about knowledge, knowledge brings about strength.⁴⁶

Liang adapted this concept from Kang Youwei, who had described "community as the essence, and change as its application,"⁴⁷ thereby skillfully varying Zhang Zhidong's 張之洞 (1837–1909) famous slogan: "Chinese learning as the essence, Western learning as its application." While Zhang's dictum characterizes the self-strengthening movement that had carried Chinese hopes for three decades before, now the new catchword upon which China's future hinged was *qun*, "community." Many critical thinkers agreed with Kang: Tan Sitong, Zhang Binglin, Huang Zunxian, Cai Yuanpei, and others wrote essays on *qun*, and Liang Qichao even planned an entire book on the topic. Some contemporary scholars speak of a veritable "*hequn yundong*,"⁴⁸ a "community movement." *Qun* was the first term for the concept of "society" in the Chinese language; but it was more than that: in conceptualizing the unity of China's people that obliterated all internal differences, it was the key to all of China's problems.⁴⁹

The Idealized "Community": *qun*

The introduction of the word *qun* in the sense of "society" goes back to Yan Fu. He first introduced the thought of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer in an article published in the *Guowen bao* (Tianjin) in 1895, and in 1898 he translated the first two chapters of Spencer's *Study of Sociology* into Chinese. The word he chose for "sociology" was *qunxue* 羣學, and the word for "society" *qun* 羣. As is

44 Cf. *Kang Youwei datong lun erzhong*, and Thompson 1958. The book was conceived and written over many years, perhaps beginning in the early 1880s, until its publication in 1935. The basic ideas seem to have been formulated in 1901–1902 (Chang 1987, 56). Of course, Kang borrowed his vocabulary from canonical literature – *taiping* from the *Gongyang zhuàn* and *datong* itself from the "Liyun" chapter of the *Liji* – but he developed them in entirely new ways (cf. Chen 2011).

45 Tan Sitong, *Renxue* 1, 6 and 9: 仁以通為第一義。[...]。通之象為平等。[...]。平等者，致一之謂也。一則通矣，通則仁矣。

46 Liang Qichao 1896a, 31: 道莫善於羣。莫不善於獨。[...]。羣故通。通故智。智故強。

47 Liang Qichao 1896c, 3 (preface): 先生曰。以羣為體。以變為用。斯二義立。雖治千萬年之天下可已。For Kang Youwei's views on *qun*, cf. Wang Hongbin 1985, 240–241.

48 Wang Hongbin 1985, 240.

49 It should be noted that *qun* was functionally equivalent to the concept of "nation," which equally appeals to internal coherence and external separation; cf. Yu Yi 1903: 故曰民族主義者。對外而有界。對內而能羣者也。

so often the case when Chinese thinkers introduce a new thought, Yan Fu makes reference to an old one. In this case, he explicitly refers to *Xunzi* in explaining his terminology:

I call his [Spencer's] teachings *qunxue* in accordance to Xun Qing's remark that what raises man above beasts is his ability to form communities [*qun*], hence "*qunxue*."⁵⁰

Yan Fu's reference to *Xunzi* was not incidental. He said of himself that "before establishing a [translation] term, I remain undecided for weeks and months,"⁵¹ and his contemporaries who used the term *qun* were also well aware of its origins.⁵² It is therefore worth quoting the *locus classicus* in full.

In strength [men] are not equal to oxen, in swiftness they are not equal to horses; yet oxen and horses are put to their use. Why is that? I say it is because men can form communities and animals cannot. How can men form communities? I say it is by divisions. How can divisions be enacted? I say it is by righteousness. Thus, if divisions are made by righteousness, harmony will result. If there is harmony, unity will result; if there is unity, great strength will result; if there is great strength, power will result. If there is power, all objects can be controlled. Therefore, one may attain residence in places and houses. Thus, for the proper sequence of the four seasons, for control of all the myriad things, and for the universal benefit of all under heaven, there is no other principle: they are achieved through division and righteousness. Therefore, men by nature cannot but form communities. If a community is without divisions, strife will result; if there is strife, disorder will result; if there is disorder, rifts will result; if there are rifts, weakness will result; if there is weakness, the objects cannot be controlled and one cannot attain residence in places and houses. This means that one cannot for a single moment discard rites and righteousness. The ability to thereby serve one's parents is called filial piety; the ability to thereby serve one's elders is called brotherly affection; the ability to thereby serve one's superiors is called obedience; the ability to thereby employ one's subordinates is called filial rulership. The ruler is defined by the ability to form a community. If the principle of forming a community is fulfilled, then the myriad things all find their proper place, the six domestic animals all achieve maturity, and all living beings achieve their destiny.⁵³

According to the *Xunzi*, the ability to form communities sets man apart from beasts. It is the precondition for the humanization of the hominids, as it were, and their ultimate destiny, at once the essence of mankind and its highest fulfillment. As such, forming a community does not simply mean banding together; it is more complex. For it was all too evident in the Warring States period that people could not possibly live together in one single, homogeneous community. Hence *Xunzi* stresses that communities need to be structured by internal divisions. In such structured communities, and *only* in such communities, man can achieve harmony, unity, and power.

50 Yan Fu 1895, 24 (cf. Chen Xulu 1984, 162): 號其學曰「羣學」，猶荀卿言人之貴於禽獸者，以其能羣也。故曰「羣學」。The translation of the entire book appeared only in 1903.

51 一名之立，旬月踟躕。(Quoted from Chen Xulu 1984, 164.)

52 For example, Kang Youwei (quoted in Wang Hongbin 1985, 241) and Tan Sitong, "Qunxue," 100). For other meanings of *qun* in classical and Han texts, cf. the tables in Jin and Liu 2008, 186–187.

53 *Xunzi* 荀子 5.9, 164–164: 力不若牛，走不若馬，而牛馬為用，何也？曰：人能羣，彼不能羣也。人何以能羣？曰：分。分何以能行？曰：義。故義以分則和，和則一，一則多力，多力則彊，彊則勝物，故宮室可得而居也。故序四時，裁萬物，兼利天下，無它故焉，得之分義也。故人生不能無羣，羣而無分則爭，爭則亂，亂則離，離則弱，弱則不能勝物，故宮室不可得而居也，不可少頃舍禮義之謂也。能以事親謂之孝，能以事兄謂之弟，能以事上謂之順，能以使下謂之君。君者、善羣也。羣道當則萬物皆得其宜，六畜皆得其長，羣生皆得其命。For a translation, cf. Knoblock 1988, vol. 2, 104, who however over-interprets the key terms by translating *qun* as "society" and *fen* as "division of society into classes."

This thought was eagerly adopted by intellectuals in Yan Fu's times.⁵⁴ "Just as a house without walls cannot be inhabited and devices without wheels cannot be turned," they argued, "humans without communities cannot establish themselves."⁵⁵ And just like *Xunzi*, who stated that "the ruler is defined by the ability to form a community," it was agreed that the organ that achieves a "community" is the ruler. Liang Qichao affirmed that "he who can form a community is called ruler,"⁵⁶ and his disciple Ou Jujia 歐渠甲 (1870–1911) elaborated on the thought:

Just like particles unite to form a body and clans unite to form a state, so the people unite to compose a ruler. The ruler is the sum of the people; he and the people are one body: therefore he who can form a community of the people is called a ruler, and he to whom the people turn, a king.⁵⁷

"Community" and good rulership seem to be closely related, even synonymous: "he and the people are one body," which means that "the ruler *is* the community," as Zhang Binglin 章炳麟 (1868–1936) succinctly put it.⁵⁸ Obviously, it was not simply Yan Fu's preference for tradition-bound translations⁵⁹ that made *qun* the central term of a debate that began occupying important parts of the scholarly world around 1895. The term *qun* harked back to a hallowed tradition and heralded everything China needed in a period of weakness and humiliation: harmony, unity, and strength.⁶⁰ It is no accident that the appeal to "unite as a community," *hequn* 合羣, became the rallying cry of reform-minded intellectuals at the close of the 19th century.⁶¹ Perhaps nobody wrote this more clearly than Liang Qichao:

The quality that the people of our country lack the most is first of all public virtue. What is public virtue? It is that through which human communities become communities and nation states become states: they all require this virtue in order to become established. "Man is an animal that is skilled at forming communities" (this is a quote from Aristotle). If men do not form communities, how do they differ from beasts? ... Therefore public virtue is the source of all states. Whatever benefits the

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- 54 It had previously been adopted in the 18th century in a more narrow sense "to legitimize literati groups" (Elman 1990, 302), but late Qing intellectuals "stepped out of that tradition" (*ibid.*).
- 55 Anon. 1903a (quoted from Zhang and Wang 1960, 361): 室之無輪也，不可處也，器之無輪也，不可轉也，人之無羣也，不可立也。
- 56 Liang Qichao 1896c, 3: 記曰。能羣焉謂之君。
- 57 Ou Jujia 1897: 今夫合質點而成體。合族類而成國。合眾民而成君。君也者。民之積也。君與民一體也。故能羣民謂之君。民所歸往謂之王。 cf. also Jian Bozan 1953, vol. 3, 153, and Zarrow 2012, 67
- 58 Zhang Binglin 1900a, 54: 君者羣也。 Cf. Hobbes' definition of "civil society" as "a multitude of men, united as one person by a common power," and the thought of Lorenz von Stein that the state is the "personified will of the community" (quoted in Riedel 1975a, 734, and Riedel 1975b, 844). Nakamura Keiu 中村敬宇 (1832–1891), writing in the early Meiji period, displayed a similar "indifference to distinguishing between society and government": "Because he locates this political community in an ideal village – under the conditions theorized by Hobbes, Locke, and Ferguson, where society and government are one – Nakamura succeeds in negating social hierarchy but confines himself to a pure democracy in which all citizens are simultaneously subjects and masters, lawmakers and law-enforcers" (Howland 2002, 163–164; cf. also Howland 2012, 179–185).
- 59 On Yan Fu's resistance to Japanese loanwords, cf. Huang Kewu 2008, Wright 2001, 244–245, and Kao 2012, 242–243.
- 60 A possible inspiration may have come via Huang Zunxian 黃遵憲 (1848–1905), who in his *Riben guozhi* 日本國志 first published 1887 quoted the following passage from Rai Sanyō's 賴山陽 *Nihon gaishi* 日本外史 (1829): 天之生人也，飛不如禽，走不如獸，而世界以人為貴，則以人能合人之力以為力，而禽獸不能故也。舉世間力之最巨者，莫如聯合力。 (*Riben guozhi*, 37, 34a, punctuation added.)
- 61 This slogan was quite different from that of *hezong* 合眾, which was used in the sense of "federation," or, after 1895, "democracy;" cf. Jin and Liu 2008, 541–542.

community is good, whatever does not benefit the community is bad. “Form communities! Form communities!” Then you may have achievements.⁶²

So did Chinese intellectuals simply fill the gap left by one broken tradition by reinstating another, even more ancient tradition? Certainly not. Liang, be it noted, quotes not *Xunzi* but Aristotle’s *Politics* as an authority in support of “communities.”⁶³ He introduces *qun* not as based on “divisions,” as Xunzi does, but quite the contrary: “community brings about *interconnection*” (see above). Moreover, “righteousness” is not a precondition for Liang’s “community,” but rather “public virtue”:⁶⁴ Liang Qichao’s concept of *qun* would seem to differ considerably from Xunzi’s. In fact, it is an entirely new concept that subversively re-interprets Xunzi’s notion of *qun*, combining it with ideas of equality that were originally alien to it.⁶⁵ For Liang, it is not the ruler in particular who has the ability to form a community, but man in general: he is by nature a social being, a *zōon politikón*.⁶⁶ All men, not just the ruler, are entitled to form a community: “If millions of people form a community, they create a state; if billions and billions of people form a community, they create a world,” and the ruler, in Liang’s view, “just like any of the people is but a single man within a community.”⁶⁷ Clearly, this line of reasoning does not culminate in an apology for the sovereign. Instead, it introduces entirely new, modern values like liberty, equality, and political participation. All of this clearly differs not only from the *Xunzi* but also from the traditional order as a whole: no longer is the “one ruler” in opposition to the “myriad of people,”⁶⁸ but rather the ruler becomes one with the people. It is little wonder that conservative officials like Wang Xianqian 王先謙 (1842–1918) vehemently opposed the new concept of *qun*:

The greatest tribulation in the empire is “community.” The master said: “A gentleman forms a community, but not a faction” [*Lunyu* 15.22]. Clearly, if anyone but a gentleman forms a community, there will always be factions, and great disaster will ensue. [...] Ever since the [reign of the] sages, societies and factions of friends have been strictly prohibited. Therefore, at court and outside, there has been unprecedented clear order.⁶⁹

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- 62 Liang Qichao 1902a, 12 and 15: 我國民所最缺者。公德其一端也。公德者何。人羣之所以為羣。國家之所以為國。賴此德焉以成立者也。人也者。善羣之動物也。[此西儒亞里士多德之言]人而不羣。禽獸奚擇。[...]。是故公德者。諸國之源也。有益於羣者為善。無益於羣者為惡。[...]。羣之。羣之。而遂能有功者也。
- 63 To be sure, Aristotle, quite like Xunzi, was convinced that man as a *zōon politikón* can only find fulfillment of his ethical dispositions in communal life; hence the state becomes the main objective of all ethical education (cf. Windelband 1935, 127).
- 64 Liang Qichao also calls this *gonggong guannian* 公共觀念 and (in Liang Qichao 1903d, 127–128) provides a table demonstrating that the people’s virtue (*minde*) was highest in the Eastern Han and lowest in his own times.
- 65 Cf. also Chang 1971, 111, who notes that the concept of *qun* “was doubtless something new in the thought of late Ch’ing – indeed, something unique in the generation of 1890.”
- 66 Liang Qichao repeated this in his essay “Lun Zhongguo guominzhi ping’e” 論中國國民之品格 (*Yinbing shi heji, Wenji* 14, 3): 人者。動物之能羣者也。
- 67 Liang Qichao 1896c, 4: 今夫千萬人羣而成國。德北京核人羣而成天下。[...]。善治國者。知君之與民。同為一羣之中之一人。
- 68 Liang Qichao (1896) consequently argues that traditional appellations like “the solitary man” or “I, the single man” were actually meant to *defile* the ruler: 乃古之君民者。其自號於眾也。曰孤。曰寡人。曰予一人。蒙竊惑焉。孤與寡。世所稱為無告者也。而獨以為南面之名則榮之。經傳之謚汗君也。謂之獨夫。謂之一夫。聞者莫不知為惡名也。
- 69 “Qun lun” 羣論 (in Wang Xianqian 1900, 1, 13a): 天下之大患曰羣。夫子言君子羣而不黨。明非君子而群必有黨。而為禍烈也。[...]。列聖以來社會與朋黨二者為世切戒。故朝野清明為往古所未有。On this passage, cf. Chen Xulu 1984, 170, and Chang 1971, 95–96, n. 52. On Wang Xianqian’s opposition to reform, cf. W. Wang 2008, 200–209.

This order, however, had been lost, and Wang Xianqian's very opprobrium is evidence for the problem that stood at the beginning of the "community movement": the radically diverging worldviews that proliferated in late Qing society. Precisely the loss of the undisputedly correct description of the world had made it possible for *qun* to occupy the place of a fundamental and ultimate principle: "whatever benefits the community is good, whatever does not benefit the community is bad."⁷⁰ The discourse of "society" had begun at the time when the old order of legitimate and institutionalized hierarchies had been superseded by new forms of social inequality that were now conceived as problematic. Chinese intellectuals reacted to the experience of inequality by appealing to a fundamental social unity: *qun*.

This concept of "society" bears striking resemblance to early European concepts such as Aristotle's *politike koinonia* (translated into Latin as *societas civilis*), "understood as the *telos* of the human being as a political animal, *zoon politikon*." *Politike koinonia* was "the all-encompassing social system with nothing except natural relations outside of it," a system that "did not allow for our distinction between state and society" and in which "plurality and differentiation were dramatically integrated in a model that presupposed a single, homogeneous, organized solidary body of citizens capable of totally unified action – closer to our notion of community."⁷¹ Indeed, the word *qun* may suitably be translated as "community" or, in German, "Gemeinschaft." Ferdinand Tönnies, writing at about the same time as the above-quoted Chinese reformers, defined "Gemeinschaft" as being based on

the complete unity of human will as a primordial and natural condition, which despite and through empirical separation persists, variously manifested, depending on the necessary or given state of affairs, between *differently conditioned* individuals.⁷²

Just like "Gemeinschaft," *qun* designated "the natural state of humanity: *qun* was what made human beings human."⁷³ It was conceived as an ideal state of human coexistence that prevails over all inequalities and contradictions. Members of a *qun* are equal in a very fundamental sense. They are like identical particles, as in Ou Jujia's metaphor (cf. above), or like units in an aggregate, as in Yan Fu's definition:

Therefore, "communities" are always accumulations of single entities. For that reason, the quality of a group is determined by the quality of its single entities. The community is called an aggregate, and the single entities are called units. The character and form of the aggregate are governed by the units. [...]. A brush is the aggregate, and the hairs are the units; rice is the aggregate, and the grains are the units; a nation is the aggregate, and the people are the units.⁷⁴

70 Liang Qichao 1902a, 15: 有益於羣者為善。無益於羣者為惡。

71 Cohen and Arato 1992, 84–85. On the conceptual history of "Bürgerliche Gesellschaft," i.e. civil society, cf. Riedel 1975a; on the discourse of "community" vs. "society," cf. Riedel 1975b.

72 Tönnies 1991 (first published 1887; § 1, 7; original emphasis). It may be noted that Tönnies *opposed* the concept of "community" to that of "society." On a similar opposition of "Gemeinwesen" and "Gesellschaft" by Marx, cf. Riedel 1975b, 850.

73 Karl 2002, 98, referring to the thought of Kang Youwei.

74 Yan Fu 1903b, 61; also quoted in Liang Qichao 1903d, 118–119: 是故凡羣者皆一之積也，所以為羣之德，自其一之德而已定，羣者謂之拓都，一者謂之么匿，拓都之性情形制，么匿了為之。[...]。筆拓都也，毫么匿也，飯拓都也，粒么匿也，國拓都也，民么匿也。See also Yan Fu 1903a, xi. On the short-lived translation of the words "aggregate" (*tuodu* 拓都, actually "total") and "unit" (*meiyi* 麼醫), cf. Huang Kewu 2008, 14–17.

In the same vein, Liang Qichao chose the metaphor of atoms that join to form a homogeneous whole:

It may be compared to material substance. Uniting countless atoms to form a body is the meaning of “uniting as a community.” The fact that every single atom fully contains all the elements that make up the particular body is the meaning of “self-reliance.” This is what is called “self-reliance in uniting as a community.”⁷⁵

There seemed to be general agreement that within a community, every member shares the same basic characteristics that define the group.⁷⁶ *Qun* is the emphatic expression of the most fundamental and most exalted value, the unity of the people. The concept of *qun* closely resembles what in sociological parlance is called a *segmentary society*: a society based on distinct but structurally equal subsystems. Significantly, *qun* designates these subsystems themselves as well as the whole of society,⁷⁷ since the segments are all united by the same set of values. They have developed neither discrete leadership roles (“the ruler is the community”) nor other hierarchical or functional distinctions. “Inequality, then, does not have a systematic function.”⁷⁸

Such segmentary differentiation constitutes the most archaic social structure, the first evolutionary stage succeeding undifferentiated human groups and preceding stratified societies. The concept of *qun*, then, did not provide a description of a modern, functionally differentiated society that had replaced traditional stratified society; quite the contrary, it invoked the return to the *antecedent* of traditional society. Clearly, *qun* was not an empirical but a normative term, similar to what Reinhard Koselleck calls an *Erwartungsbegriff*, “infused with a sense of expectation.”⁷⁹ Paradoxically, the term signified a natural state of humankind as well as a desired future condition that the Chinese should strive to attain: it took a “community movement” to return to the state of “community.”

Indeed, strive they did. It seems safe to say that all reform plans and measures that Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and others initiated in the 1890s, first on the provincial and then on the national level, tackled the problem of inequality and the creation of new unity. For example: the publication of newspapers that were often distributed for free, thus contributing to the formation of a critical public; public libraries and lectures with free admission for the people;⁸⁰ the reform of the education system

75 Liang Qichao 1901, 5154: 譬之物質然。合無數阿屯而成一體。合群之義也。每一阿屯中皆具有本體所含原質之全分。獨立之義也。若是者謂之合群之獨立。A similar relation between solitariness and grouping was suggested by Zhang Binglin (1894, 57): 大獨必羣，羣必以獨成。 Note how in Europe at the turn of the 18th century, the concept of “society” was associated with public life (*publicum*) as opposed not to the state or the individual but to solitariness (*vita solitaria*) (Riedel 1975b, 809, referring to Leibniz).

76 This is in keeping with Herbert Spencer, who conceived “society” not as organic but as a summation of equal parts in which “the character of the aggregate is determined by the characters of the units” (Spencer 1896, 43). Note also the similar theory in Durkheim 1947, 10: “C’est un état du groupe qui se répète chez les individus parce qu’il s’impose à eux. Il est dans chaque partie parce qu’il est dans le tout, loin qu’il est dans le tout parce qu’il est dans les parties.”

77 Koselleck 1972, XVII, has called this kind of concept “Kollektivsingular.” Of course, this category is not easily transferable to Chinese, which does not express the plural morphologically.

78 Luhmann 1977, 33. For more comprehensive analyses of segmentary societies, cf. Durkheim 1960, 35–78, and Luhmann 1997, 634–662.

79 Cf. Koselleck 1972, xvi, and Koselleck 2011, 11–12, for an English rendering.

80 Cf., for example, the activities of the Nanxue hui discussed in Shin 1976, 312–314: “The *Hsiang-pao* was one of the major means by which the Nan hshueh-hui conducted its enlightenment campaign. [...] The paper was distributed by the members of the branch offices and reached the people at the village level. [...] The second important means of enlightenment was the Bureau of Book Collection (ts’ang-shu ch’u) or public library, which was open to the public. [...] The third feature of the enlightenment program was the lecture system. [...] The lectures were to be given every Sunday and to be open to all members; the public could attend with a free admission card (p’ing-tan).”

and the nationwide founding of schools, which served to reduce educational inequality; the creation of a national assembly, which would extend political rights beyond a small elite circle; and legal reforms, which would enhance equality before the law. The ideals of national unity, universal education, parliamentary democracy, and the rule of law are all related in that they serve an integrating function: they create a *qun*, a community.⁸¹

Above all, one institution was meant to promote the creation of *qun*: study societies (*xuehui*). Among the three levels of communities that Liang Qichao identified – “national communities called ‘parliaments,’ commercial communities called ‘companies,’ and scholarly communities called ‘study societies’” – the latter was clearly the mother of all communities.⁸² Just like *qun* itself, *xuehui* was said to be a time-honored Chinese tradition, an “established method for two thousand years” that was lost due to the pernicious influence of Qing scholars.⁸³ Now it had to be re-introduced with Western study societies serving as a model. Kang Youwei assumed that “the origin of the wealth and strength of the West lies entirely in the investigative powers of their study societies.”⁸⁴ Consequently, he asserted that “for stimulating character and knowledge, it is indispensable to unite a large community. [...] For uniting a community, it is indispensable to found societies.”⁸⁵ In the same vein, Li Yonghan 李永瀚 (1859–1936) wrote:

If one wants to unite the hearts of the community, bring together the bodies of the community, stimulate the knowledge of the community, arouse the spirit of the community, develop the potential of the community, and reach the feelings of the community, study societies cannot be dispensed with.⁸⁶

Such study societies were to bring together like-minded people (*tongzhi* 同志); as befits a real “community” (cf. above), all members of study societies should be not only fellows (*huiyou* 會友)⁸⁷ but

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- 81 Cf., in the same vein, Chang 1971, 106–107: “Aside from transforming the standard of political legitimation, the fusion of *ch’ün* and democracy also implied that political participation had the function of promoting group cohesiveness. This collectivistic idea of the function of democracy was in fact in keeping with the general trend among such late nineteenth-century scholars as Wang T’ao, Ch’ên Ch’iu, Ch’ên Chih, and others. Thus in one instance Liang treated the idea of people’s rights (*min-ch’uan*), almost solely as a kind of mechanism which could generate collective dynamism in China; in another context, discussing the idea of a national assembly, he emphasized that this could serve to facilitate communication between ruler and ruled and thus promote national solidarity. Underlying this concept of democracy was an image of the state as a sort of socio-political organism. [...] He viewed the newspaper primarily as an institutional channel to facilitate intellectual communication between different parts of the country. In this way the newspaper was prized as a means to promote national solidarity. More or less the same reasoning led Liang to an awareness of the social significance of law. Any group, he noted, needs law, for this was what bound a group together and gave it order. [...] Thus one important method for attaining national cohesion and strength was to learn the legal knowledge of the West.”
- 82 Liang Qichao 1896a, 31: 國羣曰議院。商羣曰公司。士羣曰學會。而議院公司。其識論業藝。罔不由學。故學會者。又二者之母也。
- 83 Liang Qichao 1896a, 31–32. Liang specifically blames Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724–1805) for representing the Han learning attitude that “the people of today should only write books and should not lecture orally” (今人但當著書。不當講學。). Interestingly, Liang dates the loss of study societies precisely to the time when the spread of printing facilitated the specialization and differentiation of scholarship: arguably, it was this very process that led to the “disunity” in late imperial Chinese society (cf. Vogelsang 2012, 398–402 and 423–427). For the supposed loss of unity, cf. also the following passage from *Xiangbao* 1898/4/8 (quoted in Chen Xulu 1984, 166): 由二千年合羣之公理湮塞弗明，日銷月蝕，至今日而有陸沈之懼。
- 84 “Shanghai Qiang xuehui xu” 上海強學會序 (quoted from Wang Hongbin 1985, 241): 考泰西所以富強之由，皆由學會講求之力。For a similar statement, cf. Chen Xulu 1984, 166.
- 85 *Kang Youwei zibian nianpu* 康有為自編年譜 (1895; quoted from Jian Bozan 1953, vol. 4, 133): 開風氣，開知識，非合大羣不可。[...]。合羣非開會不可。
- 86 Li Yonghan 1898: 欲合羣心，聯羣身，開羣智，振羣氣，造羣材，達羣情，舍學會其末有也。 Cf. Shin 1976, 311. For further discussion of the “*hequn*-movement,” cf. Jin and Liu 2008, 184.

indeed friends (*pengyou* 朋友). “Within the community, all people are friends,” Liang Qichao proclaimed,⁸⁸ and their relationships are characterized by mutual understanding, even “love.”⁸⁹ Tan Sitong supported this with historical evidence:

Starting with Confucius and Jesus, all former scholars and pastors have promoted learning by initiating study societies, bringing together great communities, even uniting several thousands or tens of thousands of people as friends.⁹⁰

But friendship was certainly not all it took. The reformers of the late 19th century envisaged study societies that were not to be organized by personal sympathy but by fields of knowledge. In this respect, Western scholarship provided a model by having one society for every field of knowledge:

Thus there are agronomic societies, mineralogical societies, societies of economics, engineering societies, jurisprudential societies, astronomical societies, geological societies, mathematical societies, chemistry societies, electronics societies, acoustics societies, optics societies, mechanics societies, mechanical societies,⁹¹ hydraulic societies, thermal physics societies, medical societies, zoological and botanical societies, and educational societies; even trifles such as photography, painting, and bathhouses all have societies. The people who enter societies range from empresses, kings, and nobles down to ordinary folks. Societies assemble up to tens of thousands of people, and they possess funds of up to several million.⁹²

Tan Sitong, too, proposed study societies organized around specific fields of knowledge.

For a society, there must first be (a field of) study, such as agronomy, engineering, economics, mineralogy, or medicine, and also sciences such as astronomy, geology, chemistry, electronics, cartography, and mathematics: they all should have societies, which should be organized in a comprehensive study society and in branch study societies.⁹³

87 For these terms, cf. Liang Qichao 1896a, 33. Liang (*ibid.*, 31) also adduces several passages from classical literature underlining the fact that noble men would assemble as *friends*: 易曰。君子以朋友講習。論語曰。有朋自遠方來。又曰。君子以文會友。

88 Liang Qichao 1903c, 77: 羣中皆吾友也。

89 Cf. Anon. 1901b (quoted from Zhang and Wang 1960, 37): 講羣學者則必以愛其同類為鵠的。

90 Tan Sitong, *Renxue* 1, 67): 自孔耶以來，先儒牧師所以為學，莫不倡學會，聯大羣，動輒合數千萬人以為朋友。For an English translation, cf. Tan 1984, 177. On the association of *societas* and *amicitia* (or *koinonía* and *philia*) that characterized the European concept of “society” / “community” until the 18th century, cf. Riedel 1975b, 807–808.

91 The difference between *zhongxue* 重學 and *lixue* 力學 is not clear to me; the two would seem to be synonymous.

92 Liang Qichao 1896a, 33: 故有農學會。有礦學會。有商學會。有工學會。有法學會。有天學會。有地學會。有算學會。有化學會。有電學會。有聲學會。有光學會。有重學會。有力學會。有水學會。有熱學會。有醫學會。有動植兩學會。有教務會。乃至於照像丹青浴堂之瑣碎。莫不有會。其入會之人。上自后妃王公。下及一命布衣。會眾有集至數百萬入者。會資有集至數百萬金者。Liang is not exaggerating; cf. the documentation by the Scholarly Societies Project of 538 scholarly societies founded before 1849 (www.scholarly-societies.org/history/).

93 Tan Sitong, “Tong qing” 94: 有會則必先有學，若農學，若工學，若商學，若鑛學，若醫學，若凡天地化電圖算格致諸學，無一不當有會，而統之於總會與分學會。Note how the first three fields of study reflect the traditional four classes of people (scholars excepted, who were to play a leading role in *all* these societies: 凡會悉以其地之紳士領之, *ibid.*). Societies of the *simin* are praised in verse (“Xuehui” 學會, *ibid.*, 93): 士會於庠而士氣揚，農會於疆而農業昌，工會於場而工事良，商會於四方而商利孔長。Apparently, while recognizing the functional differentiation of society, Tan Sitong did not yet possess an adequate vocabulary for describing the emerging social systems; hence he had to resort to the four classes of people.

Thus began the "community movement." Kang Youwei founded two study societies, the Qiangxue hui in Beijing and the Shanghai qiangxue hui; Tan Sitong and Tang Caichang founded the famous Nanxue hui in Hunan,⁹⁴ inspiring many other local "communities" in Hunan: the Qunmeng xuehui in Liuyang, the Renxue hui in Hengzhou, and the Suanxue hui in Chenzhou. These local societies were meant to be the beginning of a snowballing movement that would spread throughout the whole country and unite the people.

The main purpose and intention of this study society lies in uniting as a community: this is what a great gentleman considers first. Of course, we also want to unite our province Hunan as one big community, and finally unite our China as one big community.⁹⁵

Several hundred study societies sprang up all over China in the late 1890s,⁹⁶ testifying to the success of the movement. Here, then, was an entirely new form of association of like-minded "friends" that transcended all social hierarchies: the members of study societies joined on an equal basis and for a common cause, the strengthening of China. Study societies like the Nan xuehui "strove to bring a new spirit of equality to the Chinese people." Thus Pi Xirui 皮錫瑞 (1850–1908) raved about its lecture meetings:

At each lecture, officials, gentry, scholars, and commoners sit side by side peacefully without distinction or separation. High and low are one body. Oh! The matter of equality actually is not confined to this, but this will be the starting point for all matters in Hunan! The starting point for equality in all matters in Hunan will be the starting point for equality in other provinces!⁹⁷

Yet, from the very beginning there was a curious paradox about these study societies: in order to create one big community, many small ones were created first; and what was thought to be made up of "cohering particles"⁹⁸ actually consisted of intellectually incoherent parts. They were meant to be different and yet the same.⁹⁹ In all this, study societies reflected a paradox within the concept of *qun* itself: it meant particular "communities," of which there were many, as well as the one universal "community." What was meant as a device for achieving unity was ultimately based on plurality.¹⁰⁰

94 Ts'in 1997, 310–311, points out that "the Nan hsueh-hui was one of the major reform organizations of the late 1890s; [...] although it was a gentry reform organization, it tried to unite the gentry with the people; and finally, that Western ideas, in particular the idea of *min-ch'üan* (popular rights), played a great role in the Nan hsueh-hui. [...]. Its main political goals were to enlighten the Chinese people and mobilize them."

95 Tang Caichang 1898: 本學會大旨。意在合羣。即大君子之始念。亦因欲合吾湘為一大羣。推而至於合我華為一大羣。Tan Sitong's vision for Hunan and China was very similar; cf. "Qunmeng xuehui xu," 144: 合中國十八行省，上自朝廷，下逮草野，大夫庶士，搢紳先生，越百執事，致於氓隸，稱東事之後，能大變其風氣，聯群通力，發憤自強，以治新學者，必首湖南。

96 Zarrow 2012, 22, talks of "at least several hundred like-minded groups by 1898, with some 10,000 members in total. These numbers jumped to over 700 groups with 50,000 members by the end of the Qing." Chen Xulu 1984, 166–167, estimates "over a hundred;" Jin and Liu 2008, 205, quote Zhang Yufa's count of 668 groups after 1904.

97 Pi Xirui 1898: 每次宣講。官紳士庶。列坐其中。休休乎無畛域之分。上下一體矣。噫平等之事。原不僅此。而此殆為湘中諸事之起點歟。湘中諸事平等之起點。尤為他省平等之起點歟。 Cf. also Shin 1976, 311.

98 Liang Qichao 1896a, 31: 星地相吸而成世界。質點相切而成形體。數人羣而成家，千百人羣而成族，億萬人羣而成國，兆京陵稱壤人羣而成天下。 For the same metaphor, cf. the quotation by Ou Jujia, above.

99 Cf. Lessing's remark about European civil society: "Sie kann die Menschen nicht vereinigen, ohne sie zu trennen; nicht trennen, ohne Klüfte zwischen ihnen zu befestigen" ("Ernst und Falk," quoted from Riedel 1975a, 753).

100 In the same way, the "concept of *politike koinonia* was paradoxical. It indicated one *koinonia* among many and, at the same time, the whole, a whole with parts outside itself" (Cohen and Arato 1992, 84).

Before long, the inherent contradictions of the concept became apparent, and it dawned upon Chinese intellectuals that “uniting as a community” was not that easy at all. Newspaper editorials discussed “the reasons why China cannot unite as a community,”¹⁰¹ and even the most ardent proponents of the “community movement” had to admit that their goal was unattainable:

Nowadays, everybody in the country who has the slightest knowledge can discuss the meaning of uniting as a community. But is there anybody who can live up to the reality of uniting as a community? There is no one. Not only a great community of the entire citizenry, but even a small partial community cannot be achieved. Not only the stubborn and stupid, but also the self-proclaimed worthy and determined cannot achieve it.¹⁰²

Such “self-proclaimed innovative people,” Liang Qichao complains,

daily clamor for uniting as a community, but then one of them sets up a local society, and the other establishes a party of followers. At first, they slight one another, then they resent one another, and finally, they harm one another. [...]. The reason for this is not simply that every one of them is selfish, but that our citizens do not yet possess the virtue necessary for uniting as a community. Now if one tries to assemble countless people unable to unite as a community and orders them to be a community, what one gets is its appearance but not its spirit. Therefore what we really have to endeavor nowadays is to nourish that communal virtue.¹⁰³

Just as Émile Durkheim, a few years earlier, had concluded his magisterial study *De la division du travail social* with the appeal, “en un mot, notre premier devoir actuellement est de nous faire une morale,”¹⁰⁴ so had Liang Qichao declared that “living in this community today, we must [...] invent a new morality.”¹⁰⁵ Durkheim’s “morals” and Liang’s “morality” are not the principles of good or evil behavior, but rather the forces that provide social cohesion: “la caractéristique des règles morales est qu’elles énoncent les conditions fondamentales de la solidarité sociale. Le droit et la morale, c’est l’ensemble des liens qui nous attachent les uns aux autres et à la société, qui font de la masse des individus un agrégat et un cohérent.”¹⁰⁶ Interestingly, Liang Qichao, in his quest to “invent a new morality,” also seems to have considered laws a functional equivalent of “communal virtue”:

101 Anon. 1905a (“Lun Zhongguo buneng hequn zhi yuanyin” 論中國不能合羣之原因).

102 Liang Qichao 1903c, 76: 合羣之義。今舉國中稍有知識者。皆能言之矣。問有能舉合羣之實者乎。無有也。非惟國民全體之大羣不能。即一部分之小羣亦不能也。非惟頑固愚陋者不能。即號稱賢達有志者亦不能也。Cf. specifically with regard to women, Liang Qichao 1896, 119: 群二萬萬不知道之人，則烏可以為國矣。

103 Liang Qichao 1901, 5153–5154: 號稱求新之士。日日以合羣呼號於天下。而甲地設一會。乙徒立一黨。始也互相輕。繼也互相妒。終也互相殘。[...]。此其故亦非盡出於各人之私心焉。蓋國民未有合羣之德。欲集無數之不能羣者強命為羣。有其形質無其精神也。故今日吾輩所最當講求者。在養羣德之一事。In the same essay, Liang uses the metaphor “pile of loose sand” (一盤散沙), later famously adopted by Sun Yat-sen.

104 Durkheim 1960, 406.

105 Liang Qichao 1902a, 15: 然則吾輩生於此羣。生於此羣之今日。宜縱觀宇內之大勢。靜察吾族之所宜。而發明一種新道德。以求所以固吾羣善吾羣進吾羣之道。This passage was approvingly quoted by Huang Zunxian (cf. Zhang and Wang 1960, 330).

106 Durkheim 1960, 393–394.

Human nature differs in manifold ways, it is contradictory and disorderly. To comply with it would lead to excesses and chaos, people would stab and fight each other, unable to join together as a community. Therefore, it is necessary to use force and establish laws to discipline them.¹⁰⁷

This leads Liang Qichao to one of the main reasons why the "community movement" was a failure: its "lack of rules." Whereas he insists that "the establishment of communities, be they as small as two or three people or as big as millions of people, without exception relies on laws to maintain it,"¹⁰⁸ Liang finds the "communities" of his compatriots utterly wanting in this respect.

But perhaps it was not the lack of rules that tolled the death knell for the "community movement" but the fact that they were in need of rules at all. Even if Liang hastens to add that rules are not forced upon a community from the outside but are "collectively produced,"¹⁰⁹ the idealized concept of a *natural* community of equals is abandoned: *qun* need rules, which means that they are artificial and contingent – precisely because men are not equal but fundamentally different. Thus the idea of equality that was the foundation of *qun* became untenable and the concept itself reached a logical aporia. Indeed, this seems to be the point where *qun* was superseded by a new term: *shehui*.

Disjointed "Society": *shehui*

Shehui 社會 was an old word for a new concept. Originally designating gatherings of villagers at local shrines,¹¹⁰ the Chinese word had entered the Japanese language as a loanword, *shakai*.¹¹¹ In the early Meiji period, *shakai* was chosen – among others – as a translation for the English "association" or "society": a concept that "facilitated the inclusive identification of everyone – from government officials and samurai to common people – as a new entity: 'Japanese society.'"¹¹² While still competing with onomasiological

107 Liang Qichao 1903a, 51: 故夫人之性質。萬有不齊。駁雜而無紀。苟順是焉。則將橫溢亂動。相觸相閱而不可以相群。於是不可不以人為之力。設法律而制裁之。This passage, written in 1902, presages Liang Qichao's turn to statism, on which cf. Zarrow 2012, 104–117. Cf. also Liang's 1910 argument that "in order for a *qun* to solidify within, it must first suppress (*zhenya*) and eliminate (*xiaomie*) elements harmful to the *qun*. And it was through the exercise of such disciplinary force (*qiangzhili*) [...] that a nation (*guojia*) came into being" (Tsin 1997, 216).

108 Liang Qichao 1903c, 78: 凡一羣之立也。少至二三人。多至千百兆。莫不賴有法律以維持之。

109 Liang Qichao 1903a, 51–32: 然此法律者。非由外鑲也。非有一人首出。制之以律群生也。蓋發於人人心中良知所同然。以為必如是乃適於人道。乃足保我自由而亦不侵人自由。故不待勸勉。不待逼迫。而能自置於規矩繩墨之間。On this passage, cf. Elvin 1986, 129.

110 Cf. *Zhongwen da cidian*, vol. 6, 1383, s.v. 社會: ①節日里社之民集會謂之社會。[...]。②鄉村人民為謀勸上之共同組織也。On the old meaning of the word, cf. Sogabe 1962. A concise summary of the term's development is given in Lippert 1979, 104–107: "Eine Volksmenge, die sich am Tage des she zur Anbetung des Erdgottes zusammenfand, wurde she hui genannt, wörtlich ‚Versammlung anlässlich des Opferfestes für den Erdgott.‘ [...] Etwa seit der Zeit der sechs Dynastien fand der Ausdruck she auch Anwendung auf religiöse Zusammenkünfte und Gruppen anderer Art, insbesondere buddhistische Vereinigungen. [...]. Der Ausdruck she hui mußte in der Song-Zeit nicht unbedingt eine konkrete Versammlung von Menschen bezeichnen, sondern konnte auch für Vereinigungen, Organisationen, besondere solche religiösen Charakters, gebraucht werden [...] [und] auch für weltliche Zusammenschlüsse verschiedener Art, wie z.B. Berufsverbände und Vereinigungen, die auf gemeinsamen Interessen oder Zielsetzungen beruhten."

111 Liu 1996, 302, calls these words "Return Graphic Loans: 'Kanji' Terms Derived from Classical Chinese" (on *shehui*, cf. *ibid.*, 336). On the early uses of the word in Japan, cf. Howland 2002, 172.

112 Howland 2002, 85. The *locus classicus* for this use of the word seems to be an 1875 article by Fukuchi Genichirō 福地源一郎 in the *Tōkyō nichichi shinbun* 東京日日新聞. For the introduction and early renderings of "society" into Japanese, cf. Ishida Takeshi 1984 (or the German translation, Ishida 2008), Yanabu Akira 1982 (German: Yanabu

alternatives, *shakai* had gained wide currency by the end of the nineteenth century.¹¹³ It was quickly adopted by Chinese living and writing in Japan,¹¹⁴ and spread to China from there. Tang Caichang used the word *shehui xue* 社會學 in 1898; Yan Fu and Kang Youwei used *shehui* in 1899;¹¹⁵ and when Zhang Binglin translated Kishimoto Nobuta's 岸本能武太 (1866–1928) book *Shakai gaku* 社會學 in 1902, he chose not *Qunxue* as a title but *Shehui xue*. In that same year, an editorial in the *Xinmin congbao* 新民叢報 neatly captured the shift in vocabulary:

Shehui is the word the Japanese use to translate the English “society.” In China, the latter is also translated as *qun*. What is called *shehui* in this place simply means a community of people. Nowadays, this word is often used by those who translate Japanese books, and it already appears quite frequently. In this paper, occasionally *qun* is used, and occasionally *shehui* is used; just as the brush moves along this cannot be standardized. The writers will take responsibility for whatever confusion this may cause. But there is no doubt that some day the word *shehui* will certainly gain currency in China.¹¹⁶

This prediction was to come true. Within a very short time, *shehui* replaced *qun* as the common word for “society.” Whereas in 1902, Liang Qichao, just like the editorial of the *Xinmin congbao*, still explained the word *shehui* with *qun*,¹¹⁷ a dictionary published in 1903 already lists *qun* and *shehui* side by side,¹¹⁸ and lexicometrical studies show that after 1905 the occurrences of *shehui* clearly outnumbered those of *qun*.¹¹⁹

So did one word simply replace the other? And did it really make no difference whether people used *qun* or *shehui*, “just as the brush moves along”? Arguably, the matter is not quite that simple. “Although for a time many Chinese writers continued to use the word *qun* [...] and the compound *shehui* almost interchangeably, it was clear that a new vista on the social world had been opened up.”¹²⁰ The spread of the new word corresponded to a decisive change in the concept of “society.” Yan Fu, having both words at his disposal, drew a clear distinction between the two:

1991), Howland 2002, Saitō Tsuyoshi 2005, Chen Liwei (forthcoming), and Kimura Naoc (forthcoming). For a comprehensive list of dictionary entries for *shakai*, cf. *Meiji no kotoba jiten*, 207–208.

- 113 As late as 1910, *Doku-Wa hōritsu jiten* (132) listed the words *kaisha* 會社, *kumiai* 組合, and *shakai* 社會 as translations of “Gesellschaft,” as well as *minji gaisha* 民事會社 for “bürgerliche Gesellschaft” and *kokusai dantai* 國際團體 for “internationale Gesellschaft.” Other important translations were *nakama* 仲間, *seken* 世間, *ningen kōsai* 人間交際; cf. Howland 2002, 162–163, and Yanabu 1991, 28, for diverse translations employed by Nakamura Keiu.
- 114 An early example is Huang Zunxian who used the word, albeit in the sense of “association” or “party,” in his *Riben guozhi* (37, 33ab): 社會者，合眾人之才力、眾人之名望、眾人之技藝、眾人之聲氣，以期遂其志者也。其關於政治者，曰自由會，曰共和黨，曰立憲黨。
- 115 Cf. Chen Xulu 1984, 164.
- 116 *Xinmin congbao* 1902.11, 88: 社會者日人翻譯英文 Society 之語。中國或譯之為群。此處所謂社會。即人群之義耳。此字今日譯日本書者多用之。已幾數見不鮮矣。本報或用羣字。或用社會字。隨筆所之。不能劃一。致清耳目。記者當任其咎。然社會二字。他日亦必通行於中國無疑矣。 This was the answer to a reader’s question, for which see fn. 185.
- 117 Liang Qichao 1902a, 12, and Liang Qichao 1902b, 79, both have the same gloss: 社會即人羣。
- 118 *Xin Erya*, 63 (“Shi qun” 釋群): 二人以上之協同生活體。謂之群。亦謂之社會。
- 119 Cf. Jin and Liu 2008, 190, table 5.1 (based on the texts in Zhang and Wang 1960). The authors argue that the decisive turn from *qun* to *shehui* occurred around 1903 (p. 176) or 1904 (p. 11). This, of course, does not mean that the term *qun* was altogether abandoned; it certainly was not. As late as 1936, Ridenberg’s *Chinesisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch* defined 羣 as “Gemeinschaft, Gesellschaft,” 羣學 as “Gesellschaftslehre, Soziologie” (p. 532).
- 120 Tsin 1997, 215. However, on 223 the author asserts that “prior to the fall of the Qing [...] the term ‘society’ or *shehui* was used almost interchangeably with *qun* or *daqun*.” This is also suggested by Jin and Liu 2008, 191 and 192–200 (table 5.3).

"Community" is something that man cannot withdraw from by any means. Communities have several levels; *shehui* are communities that have rules. Such *shehui* exist everywhere in trade, craft, politics, and scholarship, but their greatest importance lies in the building of states.¹²¹

This is highly significant: "*shehui* are communities that have rules," which is exactly the aspect in which *qun* had been found wanting. The term *shehui* seems to kick in precisely at the point where the concept of *qun* had lost its credibility.¹²² The concept of "society" expressed by *shehui* is no longer a natural, pristine state of perfection in which equals, united in friendship, join together for a common cause. Whereas "love for the community and respect for oneself" had been a model to aim for, *shehui* was not lovable.¹²³ Quite the contrary: "imbued with the coldness of society for many generations," as Li Shucheng 李書成 (1882–1965) acidly remarked, people "valued individuality instead of uniting as a community and thus are bereft of an all-embracing loving heart."¹²⁴ *Shehui* is not a compassionate community, but a cold, perhaps even heartless aggregate of individuals in which "friendship alone does not suffice as a moral principle."¹²⁵

Perhaps as a reaction to the disappointing experience of the alleged "equals" not being able to find common ground, the concept of "society" is premised not on likeness but on contrasts, not on unity but on plurality. *Shehui* came in various forms; they existed "in trade, craft, politics, and scholarship" in their diverse branches (cf. above); there were "labor societies" and "soldiers' societies," both of which "mostly emerged from secret societies."¹²⁶ Indeed, the term *shehui* had somewhat uncomfortable associations with secret societies, which were collectively termed *sihui* 私會,¹²⁷ and numerous other associations that went by the name of *she*, many of which were less than reputable:

The Chinese form a great diversity and large numbers of associations, which testifies to their importance. Hence in all of the Chinese territory there is no place without associations. They are even to be encountered among beggars and thieves.¹²⁸

121 Yan Fu 1903a, xi: 羣也者，人道所不能外也。羣有數等，社會者，有法之羣也。社會，商工政學莫不有之，而最重之義，極於成國。 Cf. Huang Kewu 2008, 27. Similarly, the magisterial *Staatslexikon* by Rotteck and Welcker (1834 ff.) defined "Gesellschaft" as "eine rechtskräftig (insbesondere vermöge Vertrags) bestehende Verbindung mehrerer Personen zur Erstrebung eines gemeinsamen Zweckes" (quoted from Riedel 1975b, 835).

122 Interestingly, at the very same time, around 1903, a new term appeared: *qunzhong* 群眾, the "crowd" (or, in the less flattering translation of Wang Fan-shen 1997, 270, the "mob"). The "crowd" was quite the opposite of an idealized "community" but the "modern barbarians," whose "primitivity and rawness [...] both terrified and fascinated modern Chinese intellectuals in the first decades of the twentieth century" (Xiao 2011, 3–4). Perhaps *qunzhong* was a disillusioned conceptual successor of *qun*.

123 Zou Rong 鄒容 (1885–1905), *Geming jun* 革命軍 (Tsou 1968, app., 29): 養成相親相愛，愛羣敬己，盡瘁義務之公德。 I have not found the expression *Ai shehui 愛社會 in early 20th century sources. With the discourse of "society," love is typically directed towards the "state" and the "nation."

124 Li Shucheng 1903, 4: 染數十代社會涼薄之風，重箇人不重合群，則無博愛心。

125 Liang Qichao 1902a, 12–13: 關於社會倫理者一朋友也。[...]。然朋友一倫決不足以盡社會倫理。[...]。何也。凡人對於社會之義務。決不徒在相知之朋友而已。即絕跡不與人交者。仍於社會上有不可不盡之責任。

126 Anon. 1903b: 支那之勞動社會、軍人社會，大半出入於秘密社會之間。

127 Cf. for example, Ou Jujia, "Xin Guangdong" 新廣東 (quoted in Zhang and Wang 1960, 293–308). Jin and Liu 2008, 188–190, point to the increased use of this word at the end of the 19th century and its abandonment after 1903, arguing that these secret societies had become socially acceptable, as it were, having merged with society itself.

128 Anon. 1902 (translation of Archibald Ross Colquhoun, *China in Transformation*, New York 1898): 支那人之於結社也。其類甚眾。其數甚多。亦可以証其鄭重之意。故支那之全土。無處不結社。甚且有見之於乞丐者。有見之於盜賊者云。 On the usage of *shehui*, cf. also Gransow 1992, 29.

Just like *qun*, *shehui* paradoxically designated a host of diverse “societies” as well as the one, overarching “society above the societies.” But, in contrast to *qun*, it has a definite connotation of lowliness: “society,” as a contemporary observer succinctly put it, “is a word that stands for the common people.”¹²⁹ Moreover, *shehui* conceives the multiple societies not as basically equal and working toward a common goal but as fundamentally different, even antagonistic. Yan Fu’s statement that “*shehui* are communities that have rules” can only mean: they each have their *own* rules. They are typically not in accord but in conflict with the rules of other “societies.” This mutual antipathy had been clearly diagnosed for Japanese “societies” by Kojō Teikichi 古城貞吉 (1866–1949):

Now scholars’ societies do not tolerate common people; common people’s societies do not tolerate poets and artists; poets’ and artists’ societies do not tolerate religious or ethical theories; religious or ethical societies do not tolerate the discourse of finance and trade; financial and trade societies do not tolerate scientific or encyclopedic knowledge; scientific or encyclopedic societies do not tolerate politicians.¹³⁰

This analysis could have been taken straight from a sociology textbook. Max Weber would have called these different “societies” “Wertsphären,” Pierre Bourdieu “champs,” and Niklas Luhmann “Funktionssysteme”: different terms for a “society” which is divided along borderlines of *worldviews*. The arts paint a different picture of the world than religion, the economy is not instructed by scholarship, politics develops its own logic, and jurisprudence only follows its own laws. Whereas the concept of *qun* had reacted to the dissolution of stratified society by appealing to an idealized “community” in which all social differences were obliterated, *shehui* provided a more disillusioned diagnosis. Rather than negating social differentiation, it recognized the plurality and divisions of society, conceiving it as a functionally differentiated *unitas multiplex*, a unity in diversity.

This “society” was no longer a natural community “that man cannot withdraw from by any means”; quite the contrary: people enter “society” only when they are grown up,¹³¹ and some may even remain “outside human society.”¹³² Now it became conceivable for some people to be useless to “society,” and even the “country’s most determined men” could say: “society does not need us.”¹³³ Unlike *qun*, *shehui* clearly is neither the embodiment of human nature nor the community that potentially unites all of mankind. It is not an integrative, but a *divisive* concept predicated on the

129 Zhuangyou 1903: 社會者何也。乃平民之代表詞也。For a similar line of thought in Japan, one that associated *shakai* with the “superfluous” parts outside social systems, cf. Ishida 2008, 75.

130 Kojō Teikichi 1898 (reproduced in the *Jingshi wen xinbian* of 1898): 今夫學人社會不容俗客。俗客社會不容文藝美術。文藝美術之社會不容宗教道德等之理論。宗教道德之社會不容股分市情之談話。股分市情之社會不容格致博物之學術。格致博物之社會亦不容政治家。

131 Liang Qichao 1904a, 155: 及其幼而處家庭。長而入社會。Cf. also the usage of the term in Japan, where “school-age children, for example, eagerly looked forward to entering society (*shakai ni deru*) when they finished their studies” (Gluck 1985, 34); this was already reported by Zai Zhen 載振 (1876–1947) on his trip to Japan in 1902 (*Yingyao riji* 12, 127): 兒童 [...] 他日離學校進社會各從其職業。

132 Liang Qichao 1903d, 126: 若漢學者。則立於人間社會以外。而與二千年前地下之僵石為伍。In a similar vein, Chen Duxiu, writing in 1923, “spoke of those who were unproductive riffraff (*wuyeyoumin*) as a nonclass (*fei jieji bua*). They stood, in other words, outside the discourse on ‘society’ and thus the construction of an alliance of multiple classes for the nationalist project” (Tsin 1997, 226).

133 Liang Qichao 1904a, 158: 乃我國今日之志士。一若非言政治問題。不足云愛國。非投軍人社會。不足稱偉人。既乃不可藉手。則曰社會不我庸也。而因以自放。

divergences of social positions.¹³⁴ "Modern society is extremely complex," as contemporaries noted, and its "conditions are often discrepant,"¹³⁵ especially in a big country like China with its "widely diverse customs."¹³⁶ The fault lines within the body politic were manifold. They separated individuals from "society" as well as families, which were now by definition dissociated from *shehui*. Especially in the lively discussions about education in the early 20th century, education in the family was clearly differentiated from education in school and in "society."¹³⁷ Similarly, the "state" was conceptually emancipated from "society": "Because man cannot stand alone and act in isolation, there are families, society, and the state to sustain him."¹³⁸ Hence, "the new ethics may be categorized into family ethics, social ethics, and state ethics."¹³⁹

Moreover, "society" itself was internally divided between different hierarchical orders: "high society" (*shangliu/shangdeng shehui*) is clearly differentiated from "low society" (*xialiu/xiadeng shehui*) and "middle society" (*zhongdeng shehui*).¹⁴⁰ The divisions between these need not be as radical as in Russia, where "the thoughts of the high society and the low society are divided by unbridgeable trenches, making them just like two separate states,"¹⁴¹ but there was no doubt that social inequality was taking on new dimensions. With the concept of "society," the ideal of equality, which was central for "community," quietly left through the back door. "Society" was afflicted with the congenital defect of inequality.

Significantly, the concept of social classes, *jieji* (another loanword, from the Japanese *kaikyū*), was coeval with that of society,¹⁴² indeed it was thought to be "essential for the functioning of 'society'."¹⁴³ Now the unity of "society" could be conceived "as the difference of classes, and this difference as interdependence."¹⁴⁴ Classes, it should be noted, were by no means the same as the old "estates" of people in a stratified society. Classes are primarily attributed to individuals, not to families,¹⁴⁵ and consequently oriented not towards the past (provenance) but towards the future

134 As an integrative concept, "nation" (on which cf. the paper of Marc Matten in this volume) seems to have taken the place of *qun*. The concept developed after 1900, its usage peaking in 1903 (Jin and Liu 2008, 532), inheriting much of the enthusiasm and zealous devotion that was associated with *qun*. Cf. Kao Hsing-yi 2012, 183, who argues that "it was Liang [Qichao] who expanded the content of *qun* to that comparable with, though not synonymous with, 'modern nation.'"

135 *Da Qing Guangxu xin faling*, 1866 and 1796.

136 Sun Baoxuan, *Wangshan lu riji*, 992: 我國社會，有殊異之習慣性，為歐美所無者，[...]。Cf. Gongfa zi 1903, 5: 中國疆域之寥，遠風俗之異，[...]。

137 Cf., for example, Anon. 1903d, 9: 有家庭之教育。有學校之教育。有社會之教育。Or, Anon. 1903e, 10: 普及教育分為三期。家庭教育學校教育社會教育是也。

138 Anon. 1903f (quoted from Zhang and Wang 1960, 480): 因人之不能孤立獨行也，於是有人族，有社會，有國家以扶持之。家族、社會、國家，非別物也，由人之團結而成者也。

139 Liang Qichao 1902a, 12: 舊倫理之分類。曰君臣。曰父子。曰兄弟。曰夫婦。曰朋友。新倫理之分類。曰家族倫理。曰社會倫理。曰國家倫理。

140 For examples, cf. Jin and Liu 2008, 195, 196, 200–201.

141 Liang Qichao, "Lun Eluosi Xuwu dang" 論俄羅斯虛無黨 (*Xinmin congbao* 1903.40-41, 67): 俄羅斯之上等社會與下等社會。其思想溝絕不通。殆若兩國然。

142 Again, the *word* is older; it previously "referred to social distance or rank rather than groupings," but "the term *jieji* was used increasingly after the turn of the century to denote the differentiation of social groups" (Tsin 1997, 223).

143 Tsin 1997, 224, referring to Liang Qichao (*Yinbing shi beji*, *Wenji* 32, 85.), who approvingly quotes Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814): 故菲氏認階級差別為社會所必要也。

144 Luhmann 1985, 121. Cf. *ibid.*, 148, for an explanation of this seeming paradox: "Every difference [...] can be seen as a unity, since what is different belongs together; it is different, and not indifferent."

145 It surely is no coincidence that the concept of an "individual" (個人) appeared in China around 1904 (Jin and Liu 2008, 147 ff., and 510–511): precisely at the time when "society" gained currency.

(career), which makes “class” – and “society” – a decidedly modern term. Classes are not immutable; they are not defined by occupations but by economic status; and, importantly, they do not represent the righteous structure of a timeless order but rather are contingent and ultimately without justification. Classes provoke class struggle.

Recently, unrest has been growing in the societies of all countries, rich and poor are far apart, clashes between capitalists and workers are frequently reported in the newspapers. The power of entire states is wielded by a few big companies; the entire economy is in their grip, and the poor people can gain no foothold: from this, socialism arises [...].¹⁴⁶

Socialism was born from the concept of a “society” structured by “classes”: that is, unequal social strata perceived as unjust and contentious.¹⁴⁷ It is no accident that the Chinese word for socialism is *shehui zhuyi*;¹⁴⁸ a **qun zhuyi* would have been entirely inconceivable. However, the prominent divisions between classes seized upon by socialism only cover up a more fundamental divide in modern (Chinese) society, namely that between functionally differentiated social systems. Thus Sun Baoxuan 孫寶瑄 (1874–1924), inspired by Kishimoto Nobuta’s *Shakai gaku* (cf. above), described society in quite different terms:

Societies are made up of three systems: the control system, consisting of officials and the military; the supply system, consisting of peasants and workers; and the distributive system, consisting of traders and merchants. Some attribute the scholars to the control system, but I say: if each system wants to progress toward civilization, it cannot do without scholarship, therefore scholars permeate all three systems.¹⁴⁹

According to this analysis, society is not primarily structured by classes, but by “systems” that fulfill distinct functions. These systems are not related in a vertical hierarchy but horizontally, as it were. A functionally differentiated society has neither top nor center.¹⁵⁰ Being basically equal, the social systems do not correspond to classes, and scholars function in every one of them.

This “society” could no longer be conceived as an aggregate of uniform elements – like “particles,” “atoms,” or hairs of a brush – but only as a composite of autonomous parts. The metaphor used to describe this society was that of an *organic* body. “The organization of society is in no way different from that of an organic body,” Sun Baoxuan concluded.¹⁵¹ This point was further elaborated in a column on “explaining new terms” in the *Xinmin congbao*:

146 Anon. 1903a (quoted from Zhang and Wang 1960, 367): 雖近世各國社會之風潮，貧富遠絕，資本家與勞工之衝突，時見於報端，一國之權，幾操於數大公司，生計盡為所攬，貧人無以立足，而社會主義起於其間，[...].

147 This tallies well with the observation in Williams 1976, 246, that the problems, “in the actual development of society, were significantly illustrated by the use of the word social, in eC19, to contrast an idea of society as mutual co-operation with an experience of society (the social system) as individual competition. [...] It was from this emphasis of social, in a positive rather than a neutral sense, and in distinction from individual (q.v.), that the political term socialist (q.v.) was to develop.”

148 For the history of this translation, cf. Chen Liwei (forthcoming).

149 Sun Baoxuan, *Wangshan lu riji*, 622: 凡社會以三種系統成立：曰督制系統，官兵是也；曰供給系統，農工是也；曰分配系統，商賈是也。或以士歸入督制系統，余謂欲各種系統之進于文明，皆非讀書不可。故士也者，貫乎三系統之中也。

150 *Pace* Sun Baoxuan (*Wangshan lu riji*, 799), who believed that the economy is central to society: 商業者，組織社會之中心點也。蓋社會之進化，莫要于富。

151 Sun Baoxuan, *Wangshan lu riji*, 622: 是故社會之組織，與有機體正無異也。On the metaphor of the body in early 20th century discourse, cf. Viatcheslav Vetrov’s paper in this issue.

Society is an organic body. Among bodies, there is the distinction between simple and complex bodies, society belonging to the complex bodies. Among the complex bodies, in turn, there are four types: collective bodies, synthetic bodies, mechanic bodies, and organic bodies, society belonging to the organic bodies. Organic bodies can develop if the whole and all its parts cooperate by division of labor.¹⁵²

This is precisely what Émile Durkheim has called "solidarité organique."¹⁵³ Indeed, this analysis of society closely corresponds to the way European sociologists have characterized modern society.¹⁵⁴ It is made up of unequal parts that pursue their own specific goals but nonetheless all contribute to the functioning of the whole. This whole, unlike the ideal of "community," is no longer understood as a goal in and of itself.

Growing awareness of this new social structure seems to have been the decisive reason for the spread of the term *shehui* in the early 20th century. Significantly, it was not long before the Chinese conceptual inventory was adapted to describe the discrete social systems of society. In the first decade of the 20th century, a number of new terms that designated the very phenomenon of functional differentiation gained currency: "scholarly circles/realms" (*xuejie* 學界), "commercial circles/realms" (*shangjie* 商界), "military circles/realms" (*junjie* 軍界), "political circles/realms" (*zhengjie* 政界), "artistic circles/realms" (*wenjie* 文界), "students' circles/realms" (*xuesheng jie* 學生界), and others.¹⁵⁵ As early as 1902, Liang Qichao wrote that Darwin's theory "opened a great new world for scholarly circles" and "stirred up a great revolution in scientific and philosophic circles";¹⁵⁶ in 1903, Liu Chengyu 劉成禹 (1876–1953) and Li Shucheng called their revolutionary journal *Hubei xuesheng jie* 湖北學生界 (*Hubei Students' World*);¹⁵⁷ in 1906, a *Shenbao* 申報 article lamented that "political and scholarly circles are in disarray and unrest,"¹⁵⁸ in 1910, Ye Changchi 葉昌熾 (1849–1917) distinguished "military, commercial and scholarly circles" in his diary;¹⁵⁹ and writing in 1916, he noted that "a central military official came to talk to military and political circles."¹⁶⁰

152 Anon. 1905b: 社會者有機體也。凡物體有單體複體之別。而社會屬於複體。複體之中。復分四種。曰集合體。曰化合體。曰機械體。曰有機體。而社會屬於有機體。凡有機體之物。其全體與其各部分協力分勞乃能成長。Cf. also Fu Sinian 1919, 28: 凡名稱其實的社會，一有能力的社會，有機體的社會—總要有個密細的組織，健全的活動力。This quality of "society" is also stressed by Zarrow 2012, 201: "The timing of the adoption of the language of *shehui* gave it a distinctly organic and analytical flavor. The organism, composed of distinct but integrated parts, had to be strong to survive in a Darwinist world."

153 Durkheim 1960, 79–102.

154 The entire European 19th century appears as "the century of biological and biological thinking; German Romanticism in particular rebelled against the mechanistic worldview of the Enlightenment: 'organism' developed into an antonym of 'mechanism.' The unity of the state, for example, is imagined as an organism, the parts of which – the 'organs' – have to harmoniously fit into and be subservient to the whole" (Wimmer 1996, 81). The metaphor of the organic *state* was introduced into China through the writings of Bluntschli (Machetzki 1973, 65–68, and app. I, Text C).

155 These words do not seem to have been in use before the 20th century. None of them is listed in the comprehensive *Peiwen yunfu* (69, 2821–2822, s. v. *jie* 界), nor have I found any occurrences in later Qing texts. The word *fajie* 法界, which might be expected for "legal circles/realms," was of course long established in Buddhist terminology, designating the realm of *dharmā*. This might explain its absence within the new terminology.

156 Liang Qichao 1902a, 79, 81: 全球思想界。忽開一新天地。[...] 為科學界哲學界起大革命者也。Cf. also Liang Qichao 1902c, 11: 孔北老南。對壘互峙。九流十家。繼軌並作。[...] 非特中華學界之大觀。抑亦世界學史之偉蹟也。

157 Cf. Li Shucheng 1903, 3, who locates the students' realm between high and low society: 學生介[sic!]於上等社會、下等社會之中間，為過度最不可少之人。Cf. also Qiu Jin 1907, 2: 觀數十年來我中國學生界之現狀可知矣。Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (1875–1907) (*ibid.*) also calls the Chinese students in Japan *Dongying liuxuesheng jie* 東瀛留學生界。

158 *Shenbao*, no. 11784, 1906/2/9, 2: 於是政界學界均為之紛然不靖。

159 *Yuandu lu riji* 14, 11a [171]: 全城軍商學界自十三至十五夜提燈 [...].

Such terms no longer labeled hierarchical estates or strata but functionally defined *social systems*.¹⁶¹ These social systems do not mutually support one another but pursue only their own interests,¹⁶² and this operative independence is precisely the reason why they are structurally interdependent. Just as class struggle was singled out by Marxists as the driving force in history, the competitive self-interest of social systems – not their putative co-operation – could be identified as the main impetus for social evolution.

Unlike *qun*, the concept of *shehui* had the virtue of taking full account of the internal divisions of society. In this way, it avoided the logical problems that arose with the observation that different *qun* were fundamentally divided. But instead, it incurred other problems. Almost simultaneously with the word *shakai*, another expression entered Chinese discourse from Japan: *shakai mondai*, “social problems.”¹⁶³ In the late 19th century, the term encapsulated economic crises, strikes, moral decay, alienation of classes, and other difficulties that came with Japan’s rapid modernization: all these “pathological phenomena” were associated with *shakai*. In the late Meiji period, when “the opinion prevailed that society itself was problematic from the very beginning,” the term evoked “the broken harmony of society.”¹⁶⁴

So did the corresponding Chinese term. From the beginning, *shehui* meant trouble and “unrest.”¹⁶⁵ Although in principle the different parts of society, being interdependent, were expected to “cooperate by division of labor” (cf. above) and thus respect the common good, empirical evidence seemed to prove that the contrary was true.

The value of society lies in its ability to protect the common interest: with common interest, there is a society; without common interest, there is no society. Hence, if within a society people make a concerted effort and work together, if they provide mutual aid and protection, if the ill and infirm support one another, if they unite and mutually protect each other, then this society is worthy of the name “society.” However, our countrymen’s character is just the opposite. They harm and humiliate themselves, assault and abandon themselves, each one scheming in private without considering the common interest. In this way, although there is a society, it is as if there were none.¹⁶⁶

160 *Yuandu lu riji* 16, 9a [473]: 初七日星臺來言軍政兩界 [...].

161 However, there are other cases, such as *Nijie* 女界 (Qiu Jin 1907, 2), which are not functionally defined.

162 Cf. the quote by Kojō Teikichi (see p. 174) and the classical analysis by Max Weber: “Wenn irgend etwas, so wissen wir es heute wieder: daß etwas heilig sein kann nicht nur: obwohl es nicht schön ist, sondern: weil und insofern es nicht schön ist, [...] und daß etwas schön sein kann nicht nur: obwohl, sondern: in dem, worin es nicht gut ist, [...] und eine Alltagsweisheit ist es, daß etwas wahr sein kann, obwohl und indem es nicht schön und nicht heilig und nicht gut ist” (“Wissenschaft als Beruf,” Weber 2002, 500).

163 Ultimately, this term is traceable to 19th-century Germany, where the misery of the industrial proletariat was discussed as the “soziale Frage.”

164 Ishida 2008, 75–76. Cf. also Gluck 1985, 27, who calls *shakai mondai* “the staple diet of politicians” in Japan at that time.

165 Sun Baoxuan, *Wangshan lu riji*, 896: 社會上所以多風潮者，風即氣也，由眾人之氣不平所致。

166 Ke Xuan 1904: 所貴乎社會者。以其能保公共之利益也。有公益者為社會。無公益者非社會。故夫一社會之中通力合作。守望相助。疾病相扶持。互為團結。互為保護。斯不愧社會之名稱。乃我國人之性質則反是。自殘自侮。自暴自棄。各便私圖。而不計公益。若是則雖有社會而與無社會等。The low esteem of “our countrymen’s character” may derive from Arthur H. Smith’s influential book *Chinese Characteristics* (1890), which had been translated into Japanese in 1896 and thence into Chinese in 1903 under the title *Zhinaren zhi qizhi* 支那人之氣質。

This echoes Fu Sinian's cynical quote from the beginning of this article: Chinese "society" simply was not worth the name. In the beginning of the 20th century, many Chinese shared this disenchanting attitude. They deplored "all kinds of disgusting, despicable, loathsome and repugnant conditions in society,"¹⁶⁷ or complained that "nowadays, the atmosphere in our country's society is rotten to the extreme,"¹⁶⁸ and that "the bad state of society is being laughed at by foreigners."¹⁶⁹ It was called a "dark, corrupt society," one whose "corruption has already come to a head."¹⁷⁰ Some attributed official malfeasance to "the decay of society";¹⁷¹ others, commenting on the ghoulishness of some Chinese in the Russo-Japanese War, considered their behavior "a miniature image of China's entire society."¹⁷² And Liang Qichao, not to be outdone, lamented a Chinese "society that has long suffered corruption":

Looking at the whole of today's society, there is not a single part that is not pathological. [...] In today's state, there are all kinds of old, rotten societies whose moral darkness is unimagineable.¹⁷³

Such things were not said about *qun*, the unspoiled, natural community that could only be described in affirmative terms.¹⁷⁴ *Shehui*, per contra, is often vilified in this way.¹⁷⁵ While "community" is good by nature, "society" is intrinsically problematic. The concept does not cater to the romantic notion of a cordial community of equals; rather, it diagnoses the inherent pathologies of modern society. "Society" is, as Jürgen Habermas once put it, the title "that subsumes the tensions, contradictions, and uncertainties that result from the effectiveness of the ideas of freedom and equality."¹⁷⁶ *Shehui wenti* were so widely discussed in China at the beginning of the 20th century that the expression could be read as a *genitivus definitivus*: society is the problem.¹⁷⁷ It is shorthand for social inequality. Being built on divisions, it no longer has a universal system of values that integrates its elements, but only the divergent codes of particular social systems. "Society" is fundamentally *amoral*: in this sense, it is corrupt.

Despite its pessimistic tone, this concept of "society" prevailed. The reason seems to lie in the fact that the concept provided not only a problem but – and this makes it so sophisticated – also its solution. "Society" may be less than perfect, perhaps even downright rotten – but it can be *changed*. This is the clincher. The concept of *qun* implied a timeless quality. "Community" was naturally in a state of equilibrium; it could perhaps evolve – *jinhua* 進化 is the verb usually used in this context¹⁷⁸ –

167 *Geming jun* (Tsou 1968, app., 26): 吾不忍執社會上種種可醜可賤可厭可嫌之狀態。以出於筆下。

168 Cai E 蔡鍔 (1882–1916), *Zeng Hu zhibing yulu*, 4: 今日吾國社會風氣敗壞極矣。

169 Chen Liu 陳瀏 (1863–1929), *Taoya* 1, 6: 社會惡狀為外人所笑。

170 Anon. 1909: 支那社會之腐敗。已達極點。[...]。此等黑暗腐敗之社會。Cf. also Anon. 1904a.

171 Zhang Jixu 1903 (quoted from Zhang and Wang 1960, 438): 官吏溺職，吏胥助虐，非社會腐敗之現象乎。

172 Anon. 1904b, 24: 此中國全社會之真相而縮小者耳。

173 Liang Qichao 1903d, 127, 131, and 136: 久經腐敗之社會。[...]。實鑒於今日之全社會。幾無一部份而無病態也。

[...]。今日國中種種老朽社會。其道德上之黑暗不可思議。On parts of this passage, cf. Elvin 1986, 126–127.

174 The one exception I have found is Anon. 1903a (quoted from Zhang and Wang 1960, 363): 尸位素餐，蠅營狗苟，醉生夢死，走肉行尸，亦人群腐敗之常耳。Note that Wang Xianqian's conservative criticism, quoted above, was not directed against *qun* in the sense of "society," but against discrete "communities" that he regarded as "factions."

175 Cf. also Tsin 1997, 225, who quotes Dai Jitao (1891–1949) talking about "the defects of the constitution of 'society' (*shehui zuzhi de quexian*)."

176 Quoted from Nassehi 2006, 34.

177 Cf., for example, Wu Zhihui, "Shehui wenti" 社會問題; Wu Xingrang 1908–1909 ("Shehui wenti"); Wu Xingrang 1910 ("Woguo zhi shehui wenti" 我國之社會問題); Google's Ngram Viewer (accessed February 2013), for what it is worth, yields a steep increase in the appearance of the term *shehui wenti* 社會問題 between 1903 and 1909, then, after an equally steep drop, a second peak between 1916 and 1929, and a third peak starting in the mid-1970s.

178 Cf., for example, Zhang Jixu 1903 (quoted from Zhang and Wang 1960, 437): 歐洲政治人羣之進化。Or, Anon.

in the sense of developing its inherent assets more fully, but its essence could not be altered. *Qun* was “not so much a historically evolved category as a primordial one;”¹⁷⁹ thus it could only be located in a remote golden age, but not described as changing over time. *Shehui*, on the other hand, was from the outset conceived as historical. It was readily projected back in time: soon it became commonplace to distinguish “old society” from a fundamentally altered “new society,”¹⁸⁰ and it seemed perfectly reasonable to write the history of “society,” beginning in earliest times.¹⁸¹ In the alluvial period, it was speculated, “people valued their mother’s line and did not know their father’s line. There were no families, much less states, but society was already there in its embryonic form.”¹⁸² From this perspective, the Gonghe interregnum (842 B.C.) might well appear as the first “middle class revolution” in Chinese history, followed by many other social revolutions throughout three millennia;¹⁸³ and Mozi could well be called China’s “first great sociologist.”¹⁸⁴ Of course, there is a Chinese society, there always has been.¹⁸⁵ Retrospectively, this society always appeared to have been just as problematic as the present, troubled by injustice, violent conflicts, and “class struggle.”

However, *shehui*, possessed of a history, by the same token also has a *future*: not a destiny, but an open future that “even a sage could not foresee.”¹⁸⁶ Driven by its inner antagonisms, it is forever subject to change. Society seems to be permanently under reconstruction. “In the last century or so,” Liang Qichao observed, “the world’s societies have daily progressed toward civilization: this force cannot be suppressed.”¹⁸⁷ Contemporaries marveled at “the speed at which old society is receding and the speed at which new society is progressing.”¹⁸⁸ This change affected not only the way people interacted, but also the way the world was conceived: “As society changes and grows more complex every day, new phenomena and new terms are bound to appear every day.”¹⁸⁹ “Society” itself is one of these terms: as such, it is both the result and the reflection of social change.

The concept of *shehui* incorporates a temporal dimension that reflects the temporal structure of modernity itself, in which virtually everything is subject to change.¹⁹⁰ “Society” is imbued with the key notion of modernity, progress, which is change for the better:

1903c (quoted from Jin and Liu 2008, 194): 國者，人類之羣之進化者也。

179 Karl 2002, 99, referring to Yan Fu.

180 Cf., for example, Dawo 1903 (“Xin shehui zhi lilun” 新社會之理論) and Wu Zhihui, “Shehui wenti,” 125–126

181 Cf. Cai Hesen 蔡和森, *Shehui jinbua shi* 社會進化史 (1924), Guo Moruo 郭沫若, *Zhongguo gudai shehui yanjiu* 中國古代社會研究 (1930), Hou Wailu 侯外廬, *Zhongguo gudai shehui shi* 中國古代社會史 (1949), and several other works included in the *Minguo congshu* 民國叢書 (Shanghai 1989).

182 Dawo 1903, 9): 其時但重母系，不知父系，既無家，安有國，然而社會之雛形已具矣。

183 Liang Qichao (1904b, 33) lists 22 such “revolutions.” Cf. *ibid.*, 34, for the Gonghe “revolution.”

184 “Mo Di zhi xueshuo” 墨翟之學說, *Juemin* 1904.7, 7: 我國社會學家第[一]偉人墨子。

185 But note the attentive reader who criticized this as an anachronism in *Xinmin congbao* 1902.11, 87–88: 第四號學術第二頁云。獨至獲麟以後。迄於秦始。實為中國社會變動最劇之時代。按中國當時未有社會。而賁報云最劇之時代。意即坑儒焚書之禍歟。或當時有如今日社會之舉。與社會相暗合歟。For the answer to this inquiry, cf. above, page 21.

186 Anon. 1904c: 總之五十年以往。吾中國社會之前途。雖有聖者。殆不敢豫。

187 Liang Qichao 1898, 29: 軌近百餘年間。世界社會。日進文明。有不可抑遏之勢。

188 Dawo 1903, 13: 今試觀我社會十年中之現象，舊社會退步之速，與新社會進步之速，不可持鑿計。

189 Liang Qichao 1903b, 57: 社會之變遷日繁。其新現象新名詞必日出。Cf., in the same vein, Liang Qichao 1905: 社會由簡趨繁。學問之分科愈精。名詞之出生愈夥。

190 On the “introduction of a temporal dimension” (*Verzeitlichung*) into modern concepts, cf. Koselleck 1972, XVI–XVII, and Koselleck 2011, 11–12.

Change means evolution toward the better. [...]. Hence society's evolution toward the better should be pursued within change: the more change there is, the more progress there necessarily is.¹⁹¹

In other words, "society" may be improved, and actively so. While *qun* was taken "to be essentially given; for neither was it a problem that needed to be explained or a condition to be forged,"¹⁹² *shehui* could be reformed, reconstructed, even revolutionized. Words like *gaige*, *gaizao*, *gailiang*, or *geming*, entirely absent from the discourse of *qun*, were frequently connected to *shehui*.¹⁹³ "China's rescue," it was proclaimed, "must begin with the reform of society,"¹⁹⁴ and this could imply drastic measures:

To change society, one cannot organize it like the old society; so one needs to destroy the old society and wash it away.¹⁹⁵

Anarchists like Wu Zhihui 吳稚暉 (1864–1953) believed that "without government society would be more civilized and ameliorated;"¹⁹⁶ Sun Yatsen repeatedly proclaimed the need for a "revolution of society,"¹⁹⁷ indeed the "objective of a revolution, declared the Guomindang theorist Dai Jitao confidently in 1919, was to 'reconstruct (*gaizao*) the Chinese nation and society.'"¹⁹⁸ Whereas social inequality could perhaps not be altogether eradicated, it might be mollified and made bearable. "Society's" state was bad, but it could be improved: this was the premise of China's great "enterprise of civilizing society."¹⁹⁹

If *qun* is a Chinese equivalent to "civil society" (cf. page 167), *shehui* is a civilized "society."²⁰⁰ As such, it is at once a boon and a burden. For not only could "society" be reformed and civilized, it actually *had* to be reworked – permanently. The question "by what means our society can be kept aligned"²⁰¹ and the search for "new morals" that provide social cohesion have remained main themes of Chinese discourse throughout the 20th century. These problems were the point of departure for the new discipline of sociology (*shehui xue*, not *qunxue*) that became institutionalized in the 1920s and soon matured into "the most flourishing sociology in the world."²⁰² The avowed goal of this sociology was not only to diagnose but also to treat "social problems":

191 Kojō Teikichi 1898: 蓋變化者。進化於善也。[...]。則社會之進化於善。亦當求之於變化之中也。變化愈多。而進境亦必多。

192 Karl 2002, 99.

193 On "revolution," cf. the article by Daniel Leese in the present volume.

194 Baihua Daoren 1904: 救護中國必從改革社會下手。

195 Yang Dusheng 1903 (quoted from Jin and Liu 2008, 198): 改造社會者，不能仍舊社會而組織之，則必破壞舊社會而滌蕩之。

196 Wu Zhihui, "Shehui wenti," 126: 無政府為更文明愈改良之社會。

197 Cf. Sun Yatsen 1912a or Sun Yatsen 1912b.

198 Ts'in 1997, 225. The author argues that "if 'society' was not simply a shapeless mass of humanity coming together but was rather systematically constituted with different 'classes,' it was then also more amenable to methodical dissection and reconstruction. [...] The impulse to transform the constitution of 'society' was undoubtedly further reinforced by the influence of Marxian philosophy, which treats 'society' as an object having a positivity of its own" (ibid.).

199 Anon. 1903c, 11: 社會之文明事業。 Cf. also Liang Qichao's remark on the progress toward civilization, quoted above.

200 Note how, in a very similar way, in the 18th century "civil society" turned into "civilized society" in England, and "société civile" into "société civilisée" in France (Ricdel 1975a, 750).

201 Liang Qichao 1903d, 132: 然則今日所持以維持吾社會於一線者何在乎。Liang's disillusioned answer was: 亦曰吾祖宗遺傳固有之舊道德而已。

202 "[...] at least with respect to its intellectual quality." Maurice Freedman, referring to Republican China (quoted from Dikötter 2008, 62). On the history of Chinese sociology, cf. Gransow 1992.

The greatest task in the application of sociology is to understand society's merits and demerits and, accordingly, abolish the demerits and preserve its merits in order to promote the progress of society.²⁰³

But “social problems” were there to stay. Although “socialism” kept up the hope for a better future, the maintenance of “social order” (*shehui zhixu*) – a term that appeared in the early 1900s – remained a perpetual concern,²⁰⁴ and the relentless social engineering campaigns under the rules of the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party go to show that the task was ultimately impossible. The very concept of “society” gave rise to “permanent revolution,” or at least to permanent reform.

However, it was never “society” itself, beset by division and acrimony as it is, that could bring about reform and betterment. This was the duty of the *state*. The modern concept of “state” (*guojia*) was a fission product of “community.” *Qun* was all but synonymous with the ruler (*jun*), and virtually embodied all political power. The “state” was its highest form of organization, symbolizing the unity and perfection of a “community.” This changed significantly with the conceptual shift to *shehui*. Now, the state was understood as clearly distinct from society as the sole legitimate and universal power of coercion.²⁰⁵ Represented by an “omnipotent government,”²⁰⁶ this “state” was conceived as being opposed and even antagonistic to society:

Between society and the state there often occur conflicts that cannot be harmonized. [...] State organizations are fit to resist the power of society.²⁰⁷

With this conceptual move, a revolution that could change the state became conceivable; and it may not be pure coincidence that the discourse of “society” coincided with the rise of revolutionary fervor in China.²⁰⁸ But by the same logic, the state could be supported against society. In fact, statism became a dominant trend of thought in China: “The fires of nationalism and statism in China were set ablaze in the late nineteenth century and continued to burn across the twentieth century and beyond.”²⁰⁹ While society is inherently bad, the state is “the highest source of good”: this was the conviction of seminal thinkers like Liang Qichao and Sun Yatsen. The state is there to guide, consolidate, and, indeed, rescue society, a task that the latter cannot fulfill itself. Significantly, the state does this not in the name of society itself, but in the name of the *nation*.²¹⁰ “Nation” (*minzu*) was another fission

203 Sun Benwen 1928, 115: 應用社會學最大的任務，是了解社會的優點劣點，而後去革除劣點，保存優點，以圖社會的進步。

204 Cf., for example, Anon. 1904a, 6: 娼妓營業之盛，至達於極點，其破壞社會之安寧，擾亂社會之秩序。

205 The same shift has been observed in the European concept of “society.” While “bürgerliche Gesellschaft” had long been identical to the “state,” one may observe a “Differenz von ‘Staat’ (civitas, res publica) und Gesellschaft (societas, societas civilis, populus)” beginning in the late 18th century (Riedel 1975a, 727 and 746–748).

206 *Wanneng zhengfu* 萬能政府, discussed in Fröhlich 2010, 100; cf. also the remarks in Tsin 1997, 217–218. Conversely, state power had to be controlled by *laws*. The constitutionalist movement that began in 1905 seems closely related to the new concept of “state”: just as the latter had differentiated itself from “society,” “law” was now conceptually emancipated from the “state.”

207 Gongfa zi 1903, 4, quoting “Rodorf [*recte*: Rudolf] von Gneist,” 1816–1895): 社會與國家之間，常有不能調和之衝突。[...]。國家之組織足以抵制社會勢力。

208 This is stressed by Jin and Liu 2008, 202 and *passim*.

209 Zarrow 2012, 4. Zarrow defines “statism” as “the view that the state – the institutions of governance – is the ultimate locus of sovereignty, self-legitimizing, and the highest source of good” (*ibid.*) and goes on to illustrate his point in great detail over some 300 pages.

210 This is developed with regard to Sun Yatsen by Fröhlich 2010, to whom I owe the thought. Cf. also Tsin 1997, 227: “The communists, in particular, were to engage in an extensive and methodical project of restructuring “society” with the use of coercion and force, often in the name of the ‘nation.’”

product of *qun*, a concept that became plausible, even necessary, with the transition to the discourse of *shehui* (cf. fn. 134). As an expression for the unity of the people, "nation" inherited a function of *qun* that *shehui* could no longer fulfill.

Both the "fires of nationalism and statism" seem to have been ignited by the new and problematic concept of "society." *Shehui* was far more than an innocuous loanword from the Japanese. Its introduction was intimately linked to the transformation of an entire conceptual field, which includes terms such as "individual," "revolution," "reform," "state," and "nation." These are key concepts that shaped Chinese history throughout the 20th and on into the 21st century. And so is "society." While the nuances of the concept certainly changed over the course of a century,²¹¹ its troublesome nature remained unchanged: the problem that is "society" has stayed with the Chinese all along.

Conclusion

It was the crumbling of the old conceptual order that gave rise to the discourse of "society" in China. The time-honored concept of the "four estates," already under pressure since Ming times, finally collapsed in the late 19th century. Especially between 1895 and 1905, dramatic changes in social structure had made the concept of a pre-ordained fourfold hierarchy untenable: the old stratified order gave way to a functionally differentiated society characterized by unprecedented and unjustifiable forms of inequality. While social divides deepened, it became all the more obvious that the divided ultimately belonged together, making up a "society." Henceforth, the discourse of "society" oscillated between the inextricable opposition of division and unity.

The first attempt to solve the problem of inequality was the conceptualization of a quasi-natural "community" (*qun*) that absorbed all differences, uniting people from various walks of life as equals and friends. *Qun* presupposed a homogeneous people that merely needed to be united. This concept, while accompanied by an ambitious movement of founding "study societies," proved to be short-lived. Around the year 1903/4 it was superseded by a rather different concept of "society," *shehui*, which was predicated not on the ideal of unity but on the recognition of inevitable divisions. *Shehui* was not a normative but a diagnostic term. Free of social romanticism, it allowed for the cynical verdict that "society" was corrupt, pathological and undeserving of its name. This concept differed significantly from its predecessor in many points:

<i>qun</i>	<i>shehui</i>
quasi-natural	artificial, governed by rules
homogeneous	heterogeneous, organic
synonymous with the state	opposed to the state
idealized, pristine	corrupt, troublesome
unchanging	historical and ever subject to change, hence: reformable, future-oriented

Perhaps it was accelerated social change and the rise of revolutionary fervor that led to the shift from *qun* to *shehui*. But more importantly, it would seem that the latter's "fitness" within a modern

211 However, there does not seem to have been a decisive shift after 1915, as postulated by Jin and Liu 2008, 6–8.

semantic field was decisive. “Society” co-emerged with the concepts of “state,” “individual,” “revolution,” “reform,” and “nation,” occupying a logical space that *qun* could not claim. Moreover, while clearly pointing to “society’s” defects, the concept also cleared the way for addressing them. This was its evolutionary advantage over *qun*: it was not a static but a dynamic concept fully compatible with the notion of progress. “Society” calls for reform. Thus the problem of inequality, which stood at the beginning of the discourse of “society,” became treatable only after the concept of *shehui* had provided the diagnosis. While inequality could perhaps not be eradicated altogether, it could be organized and made acceptable; although a union of homogeneous people appeared unrealistic, the coordination of heterogeneous groups through division of labor became a real possibility; and whereas the “unity of hearts” could not be achieved, a consensus of common interests could be aimed at.

The medications for treating the ills of “society” were reform and revolution. China has spent well over a century grappling with “society,” and has taken both medications in great doses. The revolution of 1911, Chiang Kaishek’s “New Life” movement (1934), the transformation of Chinese cities, the murderous campaigns under Mao Zedong, and the recent slogan of a “harmonious society” testify to the same unresolved problem: the intrinsic disunity of “society.” “Harmony” presupposes inequality: the Chinese have known this for more than 2000 years²¹² – but they have experienced it more acutely than ever in the 20th century.

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