THE CONCEPT OF "CLASS" IN CHINA'S TRANSFORMATIVE PERIOD, 1895–1925

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> What I want to discuss now is what the word "class" actually means. It seems that many young people, once they hear the word, think that it is as clear as the brush on the table, the moonlight in the sky, or the head on one's shoulders: that it is a self-evident fact. Little do they know that this is absurdly false. Frankly, class is an extremely unclear concept. It must be defined in a rigorous manner.
> (Zhang Dongsun)[1]

In descriptions of modern Chinese society, there has hardly been a more prominent concept than "class." As early as 1920, the novelist Cheng Zhanlu wrote that "in these days, no child [could] escape hearing or seeing the word 'class'";[2] some decades later, the words "'never forget class struggle!' [...] were plastered on the walls of cities and villages throughout China";[3] and in recent years, the Chinese "middle class" has grown to be by far the largest in the world.[4] But while there is no shortage of scholarly articles and monographs about Chinese social classes, their numbers, struggles, lifestyles, purchasing power, and

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1 Zhang Dongsun 1932, 2: 現在我要討論的是「階級」一辭究竟何指。有許多青年好像一聽此名辭便覺得其明瞭和桌上的筆，天上的月亮，人身上的頭一樣。是一個「自明的」(self-evident) 事實。殊不知大謬不然。老實說，階級是一個極不清楚的概念。非嚴格下定義不可。

2 Cheng Zhanlu 1920: 孩兒這幾天來耳之所聞目之所見總不脫階級二字。

3 Yu Hua 2014. The author adds: "Our cups had the slogan stenciled on them and our toilets had it painted on them. Even as we went to bed, we could not escape the injunction: It was printed on our pillowcases, commanding us even in our dreams to 'never forget class struggle.'" For the importance of class struggle for the history of the 20th century, see also Huang Dongya 2003, 61.

4 Cf. Wang 2012. Hsiao 2014 distinguishes nine groups within the middle class: (1) capitalists, (2) small employers, (3) self-employed, (4) managers, (5) professionals, (6) non-manual employees, (7) working class, (8) farmers, and (9) military personnel.

so on, the *concept* of "class" itself has received less attention.[5] "Class is not treated as a *problem* to be analyzed," as James L. Watson observed; "it is taken for granted."[6] Almost all studies simply assume that there *are* classes in Chinese society and that these classes are its defining characteristic.

However, the matter is not quite that simple. Writing in 1899, Liang Qichao claimed that "in Europe, it is common to divide the people of a nation into classes, whereas in China it is not;" indeed, "China can be called a country without aristocracy, and its people can be called a people without classes."[7] For Liang it was unthinkable that China could be a class society. In fact, he was perhaps "the first to use the word *jieji* in a modern sense."[8] The concept of "class" only began to spread in the transformative period from 1895 to 1925, during which the entire inventory of modern terminology reached China via Japan, and was thence adapted by the Chinese.[9]

Many of these new concepts did not (yet) reflect China's social realities. They were "anticipatory concepts," as Thomas Fröhlich has called them, that preceded changes in the social structure, opening up a new "horizon of expectation" for Chinese intellectuals.[10] Precisely because concepts such as "liberty," "equality," "communism," etc. had not yet been actualized, they became slogans in political disputes: not merely indicators, but influential factors of change. It was the concepts that created reality, not the other way around.

The concept of "class" seems to be a prime example of this phenomenon. Some two decades after having denied the existence of "classes" in China, Liang Qichao saw himself surrounded by such. He well understood why this was so: "if you give people who originally are not to be divided into classes two opposed labels, they will naturally turn into two classes."[11] This process of labeling, the discursive construction of "classes," is

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5 But cf. U 2015 for Marxist concepts of "class" in the early PRC; I thank Thomas Fröhlich for pointing this out to me.

6 Watson 1984, 2.

7 "Lun Zhongguo yu Ouzhou guoti yitong" 論中國與歐洲國體異同 [1899]: 歐洲有分國民階級之風而中國無之 [...] 故中國可謂之無貴族之國。其民可謂之無階級之民 (in Liang Qichao 2011, *Wenji* 4, 65).

8 Jin and Liu 2012, 606. Although the authors do not provide the source, they likely refer to the above-quoted passage.

9 For the "transformative period" (轉型時代), a veritable Chinese *Sattelzeit*, see Zhang Hao 1999.

10 Fröhlich 2016. Cf. also Stäheli 1998 for concepts as "pre-adaptive advances"; for the "horizon of expectation," see Koselleck 1989.

11 "Liang Qichao zai Beijing fazhuan zhi jiangyan (xu)" 梁啟超在北京法專之講演 (續),

the topic of this article. The questions it discusses are: When and why did Chinese society begin to be conceived of in terms of "classes"? What were the conceptual precursors to "class"? How did the new concept emerge, develop, and solidify between 1895 and 1925?[12] In order to address these questions, it is necessary to begin with a definition of the concept, as Zhang Dongsun pointed out (see the epigraph).

In Liang Qichao's 1899 statement, the concept of "class" indeed appears "extremely unclear," since the word *jieji* seems to conflate "class" in a modern sense and premodern *estates*, which were something quite different. This may serve as a reminder that the introduction of the word *jieji* will not do as a starting point for a conceptual history of "class." There is no one-to-one correspondence between concepts and words. On the one hand, the word *jieji* has historical meanings quite distinct from that of "class," which are of little relevance to the study of the concept.[13] On the other hand, there can be—and, indeed, have been—other words that express the concept of "class," which need to be included in such a study.[14] There is no way around it: a study of the concept of "class" needs to begin with the concept of "class."

1 The Concept of "Class"

Social "class" is a multifaceted, highly contested concept with a variety of different meanings, none of which can be simply imputed to Chinese discourse. Rather than presupposing a specific—Marxian, Weberian, or other—definition of "class" (and thereby excluding all others), it makes more sense to begin with the *least common denominator*. On the most general level, "class" refers to a *hierarchical* form of *social inequality*. While the concept may refer to very different kinds of inequality, they all share another characteristic:

> Common to all sociological conceptions of class is the argument that social and economic inequalities are not natural or divinely ordained, but rather emerge as a consequence of human behaviors.[15]

Shenbao 1921.12.14: 正因為本來不應分階級的人、給他兩個對待的名稱、他自然會變成兩個階級。

12 For a complementary discussion of "class" that focusses on Marxist discourse, see the article by Jiang Lingnan in this issue.

13 For examples, see Jin and Liu 2012, 606, and Huang Dongya 2003, 62.

14 This is crucial. Unfortunately, most relevant studies, including Jin and Liu 2012, simply deal with the term *jieji*, that is they study the changing usage of a *word*, rather than the evolution of a concept.

15 Turner 2006, 561.

Classes are man-made, this is the clincher. In contrast to the concept of naturally inherited "estates," "an individual's class is at least in some part *achieved*, not simply 'given' at birth."[16] This has important consequences: First, boundaries of "classes" are more permeable and membership therein is more fluid than other systems of stratification. Second, "classes" are no longer justified by nature or divine will; rather, they can be declared wrongful or unfair. All of this makes "class" an *essentially contested concept*: it engenders continuing disputes about its proper use and definition, about value judgments connected to "classes," about their justification and even about the question whether they exist at all.[17] By the same token, membership in a "class" is not simply given; it must be *realized*, in the double sense of the word—achieved and perceived. Whereas in an order of estates, everybody could be expected to know which estate he or she belonged to, *class consciousness* must be actively fostered. It is essential not only for individuals but for the existence of "classes" themselves: without this collective consciousness they could develop neither solidarity nor the capacity to act. There could be no "class struggle" and, ultimately, no "classes."[18]

All these characteristics make clear that "class" is not just another form of social inequality that has existed throughout history, but a specifically *modern* concept. It properly belongs to an age captivated by the belief that man himself is the originator of worldly affairs, actively shaping the world for better or worse. Man *makes* "classes"; he—and in-

16 Giddens 1993, 214. See also Williams 1985, 61–2: "The essential history of the introduction of class [...] relates to the increasing consciousness that social position is made rather than merely inherited. All the older words, with their essential metaphors of standing, stepping and arranging in rows, belong to a society in which position was determined by birth."

17 On essentially contested concepts, see Connolly 1983, 9–44, who provides the following definition: "When the concept involved is *appraisive* in that the state of affairs it describes is a valued achievement, when the practice described is *internally complex* in that its characterization involves reference to several dimensions, and when the agreed and contested rules of application are relatively *open*, enabling parties to interpret even those shared rules differently as new and unforeseen situations arise, then the concept in question is an 'essentially contested concept'" (10). Connolly argues that when confronting essentially contested concepts, the dichotomy between *analytical* and *synthetic* statements breaks down. In other words, we can no longer distinguish between statements that bear on the very definition of a concept ("all bachelors are unmarried") and such statements that require empirical validation ("all bachelors are frustrated") (17–18).

18 In Marxist terms: "An objective economic class, a *Klasse an sich* ('class in itself'), becomes a *Klasse für sich* ('class for itself') only if its members, through a series of conflicts with opposing classes, have acquired an awareness of the communality of their interests" (Wiener 1973, vol. 1, 447).

creasingly: she—defines them, contests them, struggles over them. Arguably, the thought that social inequality is *not* "natural or divinely ordained" occurred neither to European nor to Chinese minds before the modern age. Nor did they conceive of social cohesion that transcended local or kinship groups. For centuries, even millennia, the concept of "class" was highly implausible—but in the conceptual landscape of modernity, it was to take center stage.

2 Before "Class": "Estates" and the Good Order

In pre-Reformation Europe, "ordo" was the byword for the well-structured world created by God, in which all the "ordines" had their rightful place: " 'estate' and 'order' were synonymous."[19] In the stratified order of premodern Europe, inequality was conceived as natural and necessary: as late as the seventeenth century, the term had a *positive* value, and every person—farmer, artisan, or nobleman—was expected to be happy with his lot.[20] Similar reliance on an "accepted social order based on inequality" has been observed in other premodern societies:

> Thus the wealth and profligacy of Indian rajahs [...] had not been envied or resented by their subjects, as a neighbour's might have been. They belonged to, and were marks of, their special role in the social—perhaps even in the cosmic—order, which in some sense was believed to maintain, to stabilize and certainly to symbolize, their realm.[21]

In premodern China, too, social hierarchies derived from "the fact that heaven is superior and earth inferior";[22] it was understood that "honor and wealth depend on heaven,"[23]

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19 See Oexle, Conze, and Walther 1990, 200 and 204. Even Luther, who so vehemently fought for *religious* equality, insisted on the preordained *worldly* inequality of the estates: "Im eusserlichen, weltlichen leben da soll die ungleicheyt bleyben. Wie denn die Stende ungleych sein. Ein Baur füret ein ander leben und Stand denn ein Burger. Ein Fürst ein andern Stand denn ein Edelmann. Da ist alles ungleych unnd soll ungleych bleiben. [...] Das will Gott also haben, der hat die Stend also geordnet und geschaffen" ("Text der Hauspostille" [1544], quoted in Oexle, Conze, and Walther 1990, 203). For a notable exception, consider the 1580 essay on "Des cannibales" by Montaigne who found it strange that "ces moitiés ici nécessiteuses pouvaient souffrir une telle injustice, qu'ils ne prissent les autres à la gorge, ou missent le feu à leurs maisons" (in Montaigne 1965, 316).

20 Cf. Christoph Weigel: "Der Bauer, dieser oder jener Handwercks-Mann seye in seinem Stand so vergnügt als einer, der hoch am Bret seye" ("Abbildung der Gemein-Nützlichen Haupt-Stände" [1698], quoted in Oexle, Conze, and Walther 1990, 207).

21 Hobsbawm 1995, 335–36.

22 *Zhouyi zhengyi* 7, 302: 天尊地卑。

23 *Lunyu zhengyi* 12.5, 488: 商聞之矣：死生有命，富貴在天。

or at least result from the wise decisions of the former kings.[24] The stratified order was not a flaw of Chinese society but its defining feature. By the same token, the hierarchy of the idealized "four estates of people" (*simin*) was not fortuitous but unconditional. It was "the bedrock of the state," as the *Guanzi* puts it,[25] the sole correct order to which there was no alternative.

Until late imperial times, any kind of social inequality would be attributed not to man's own making but to fate: "Wealth, high status; poverty, low status; being born and being extinguished; rising and declining: this is a principle of heaven and earth."[26] Inequality was conceived as *natural* and thus good, or at least beyond discussion.[27] Since the good order was not man-made but preordained, the best man could do was not to interfere with it.

Equally important, in premodern societies most people did not develop *class consciousness*; in other words, there was no sense of solidarity between members of the same stratum. Peter Laslett has argued that, in premodern Europe, "there was a large number of status groups but only one body of persons capable of concerted action over the whole area of society, only one class in fact."[28] Apart from this elite, the great mass of the population was

> separated into the myriad familial cells which went to make up the society. [...] Working persons were held apart from each other by the social system. Many or most of them were subsumed, as we have said, within the personalities of their fathers and masters. If it had not been for the terminology which was invented for a society like our own, it would never have occurred to us even to wonder whether they could be thought of as a community, a class of their own. [...] The workers did not form a million outs facing a handful of ins. They were not in what we should call a mass situation. They could not be what we should call a class.[29]

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24 *Xunzi jijie* 9, 152: 先王惡其亂也，故制禮義以分之，使有貧富貴賤之等。

25 *Guanzi* 8.20, 188: 士農工商四民者，國之石民也。Cf. the translation by Rickett 1985, 325.

26 Qian Yong (1759–1844), quoted in Kuhn 1984, 25.

27 The Buddhist doctrine of the absolute equality of all sentient beings is a notable exception. But perhaps the very absoluteness and abstraction of this teaching prevented it from having a decisive impact on Chinese views of social order.

28 Laslett 2001, 23. The author consequently calls this a "one-class society."

29 Laslett 2001, 51. Compare Marx's insight in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "Insofern ein nur lokaler Zusammenhang unter den Parzellenbauern besteht, die Dieselbigkeit ihrer Interessen keine Gemeinsamkeit, keine nationale Verbindung und keine politische Organisation unter ihnen erzeugt, bilden sie keine Klasse" (Marx 1852, 198).

The structure of premodern Chinese society was very similar. Beneath the thin layer of the literati elite, connected by a common language, education, and lifestyle, imperial China was divided into countless villages whose inhabitants lived an isolated existence:

> Because villagers do not move around much, the communities themselves do not interact much. I think it is safe to say that life in rural society is very parochial. Villagers restrict the scope of their daily activities; they do not travel far; they seldom make contact with the outside world; they live solitary lives; they maintain their own isolated social circle. All of these characteristics contribute to the parochialism of rural China.[30]

So China, too, was "separated into the myriad familial cells which went to make up the society." In fact, it is an oft-quoted diagnosis that the basic unit of Chinese society is the *family*.[31] In this society, the family, lineage, or clan has always been the primary locus of solidarity, with little interconnection or social cohesion beyond the confines of kinship or local community. This segmentary social structure made the concept of a "class" as "a number of people banded together in the exercise of collective power, political and economic"[32] highly implausible. It effectively prevented the emergence of class consciousness.

3 "Classes" Conceived: A Divided Society

A change in this traditional order became conceivable only in the late nineteenth century, after the Qing empire had lost several wars against Western powers, and even Japan, and had been forced to give up sovereignty in several parts of its territory. This colonialist partitioning of China reached a peak in 1898, and it sparked an acute feeling of crisis among Chinese intellectuals: not only was the dynasty endangered, but "our race face[d] extinction, and the 400 million children and grandchildren of the Yellow emperor [were] about to become slaves and cattle," as a contemporary pathetically exclaimed.[33] The Chinese would have to stand up and fight for their survival, the intellectuals argued, and for this they needed *unity*.

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30 Fei Xiaotong 1992, 41.

31 See, for example, Liang Qichao, "Zhongguo ren zhi quedian" 中國人之缺點 (1904): 吾中國社會之組織，以家族為單位，不以個人為單位，所謂家齊而后國治是也 (in Liang Qichao 2011).

32 Laslett 2001, 22.

33 Li Shucheng 1903, 452: 愛國少年痛國勢之日危，種族之將滅，四百兆黃帝之子孫將為奴隸，為牛馬。

Such unity, which transcended kinship and social strata, was encapsulated in the new concept of "society"—the term that prevailed was *shehui* (from the Japanese *shakai*)—which entered intellectual discourse at the turn of the twentieth century. Between 1895 and 1905, "society" replaced the divisive hierarchy of the *simin* and redefined the way Chinese intellectuals thought about how they related to one another. In "society" everybody belonged together, all "400 million" Chinese—this became a stock phrase—formed a unity on the basis of *equality*.[34] Just like in Europe, the premodern preference for inequality was replaced by a specifically modern preference for equality.

Unity in equality, although not experienced in the present, was a promise for the future. However, it soon became clear that the unity of Chinese "society" was a *mixtum compositum*, a composite made up of very different elements. Of course, regional differences, especially between provinces, had long been recognized; but around 1900, two other distinctions came into view: first, differences between so-called "circles" (*jie*). Chinese "society" was broken down into "scholarly circles," "commercial circles," "military circles," "political circles," "artistic circles," "students' circles," and a few others. These functionally defined milieux, or social systems, did not mutually support one another, but clearly pursued their own interests: they were the hallmark of a society characterized not so much by coherence but by internal divisions.

The second distinction that appeared in the discourse of "society" was that between *hierarchical* orders. As early as 1902, a two-way distinction between "high society" (*shangliu/shangdeng shehui*) and "low society" (*xialiu/xiadeng shehui*) emerged, the former consisting of "officials, local gentry, scholars, and wealthy people," and the latter of "uneducated people, like artisans, peasants, merchants, soldiers, and members of secret societies."[35] By and large, then, "high society" was identified with people who made up the estate of "scholars," whereas "low society" was equated with the other three of the old "estates" and some others. A compatible differentiation was that between the ruling class and the ruled:

> 其位於社會之上流者，曰君，曰孤，曰卿尹，其位於社會之下流者，曰士庶。等級遞差，名義糾錯。然居是名義者類。皆誕育於是社會中。取儲於是社會中。非降自天。非涌自地。非挹注自他族。

34 For this and the following, see Vogelsang 2012.

35 Baihua daoren 1904, 909–10: 凡不讀書的人，如工、農、商、兵，共會黨裡面的人，都說他是下流社會。[...] 上流社會分做幾等：有做官的，有做鄉紳的，有讀書的，有做財主的。The earliest reference to these strata that I have found appears in a 1902 letter to Liang Qichao written by a certain Heshi ren 和事人: see Liang Qichao 2011, *Wenji* 11, 46.

> Those residing in the upper reaches of society are called "ruler," "the solitary one," or "excellency," and those residing in the lower reaches of society are called servants and ordinary men. Orders may change and status may differ, and the terms may be confused, but the principle of assigning these terms is always the same. They are all bred from the midst of society, they are all taken from the midst of society: they have not fallen from heaven, nor have they emerged from the earth or been scooped out from another people.[36]

At first sight, then, the concepts of "high" and "low society" simply seem to describe the traditional hierarchy of elite and the mass of the population. But then comes a decisive turn: these strata are "bred from the midst of society, they are all taken from the midst of society: *they have not fallen from heaven*." Here, for the first time, we encounter the explicit assertion that social inequality is *not* "natural or divinely ordained" but man-made. These social strata are a product of society: they are "classes."[37] Being "bred from the midst of society," "classes" were the result of human action and thus acquired a *temporal* quality.[38] They were no longer natural and unchanging, but subject to transformation. Indeed, "classes" *had* to be transformed: this presented a problem and, at the same time, gave rise to hopes and expectations unknown in the context of premodern "estates."

It is not an accident that the emergence of "classes" coincided with a new concept of "society"—*shehui*—that "could be reformed, reconstructed, even revolutionized."[39] Just like the old order, this "society" was based on social differentiation and inequality; but now these divisions became *problematic*. They symbolized the fact that "China cannot unite as a community":

> 第一桩是上流社會共下流社會不聯絡。中國的人，同是漢族，同是黃帝的子孫，有什麼上流、下流的分別，可不是個頂不平等的麼！但現在中國的

36 Dawo 1903, 10.

37 Evidently, the very words *shangliu shehui* and *xialiu shehui* imply that without "society"—*shehui*—there can be no "high" and "low society." Although the Chinese language does not express number, I use "classes" in the plural in order to distinguish it from the abstract concept of "class" which has become reflexive.

38 On the "temporalization" of modern concepts, see Koselleck 1972, xvi–xvii. Arguably, it is precisely the fact that in modernity social order is conceived not as God-given but as man-made that logically entailed the temporalization of all concepts, their transfer from *aeternitas* to *tempus*.

39 Vogelsang 2012, 183. In Europe, too, the new concept of "class" was connected to "the new sense of a society or a particular social system which actually created social divisions" (Williams 1985, 62).

> 讀書人，都是以上流社會自命的，凡不讀書的人，如工、農、商、兵，共會黨裡面的人，都說他是下流社會。[...] 第二椿是下流社會共上流社會不聯絡。那上流社會既然看輕下流社會，這下流社會平日沒有讀過書，也不懂世界上有平等的公理，[...] 不免自己也承認了是個微賤小人，不敢共上流社會比肩。
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> The first point is that high society does not connect with low society. The people of China all equally belong to the Han race, they are all equally children and grandchildren of the Yellow Thearch—what difference is there between "high" and "low": is that not the height of inequality? But nowadays the educated people of China all consider themselves "high society," and all uneducated people, like artisans, peasants, merchants, soldiers, and members of secret societies, all say they belong to "low society." [...] The second point is that low society does not connect with high society. While those in "high society" despise "low society," these in "low society," which are usually uneducated, do not understand that there is a principle of equality in this world, [...] hence they cannot but acknowledge the fact that they are petty, insignificant people, and do not dare to join ranks with "high society."[40]

Clearly, this was no longer the orderly separation of the old society but a highly troublesome division. It may not have been as radical as in Russia, where "the thoughts of high society and low society are divided by unbridgeable trenches, making them as two discrete states," as Liang Qichao wrote,[41] but it was nonetheless clearly observable. Significantly, the difference between high society and low society was not defined primarily in economic terms, which are usually associated with "class." Rather, they were associated with *education*. This, of course, resembles the late imperial Chinese order in which the scholarly elite, having passed through the examination system, was also distinguished by education, whereas ordinary people were proverbially dull-witted. In an analogous way, those in "low society" were considered simpleminded and uneducated: "few of them are

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40 Baihua daoren 1904, 909. Interestingly, the underlying reason for China's lack of unity, according to Baihua daoren, is not the class structure but the absence of a concept of the "public" (公共的觀念) and the predominance of "familistic thought" (家族思想): hence the *old* order, not the newfound social strata (Baihua daoren 1904, 908).

41 "Lun Eluosi xuwu dang" 論俄羅斯虛無黨, *Xinmin congbao* 新民叢報 1904: 俄羅斯之上等社會與下等社會，其思想溝絕不通，殆若兩國 (in Liang Qichao 2011, *Wenji* 15, 25). Compare Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845): "Two nations, between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts and feelings as if they were dwellers in different planets; who are formed by different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws ...the rich and the poor."

literate, and in all their lives they have hardly spent a thought about the history of the 24 dynasties or the geography of the 18 provinces—how could they develop a patriotic mind at all?"[42] They were so uncultured that "there [was] no wicked custom that does not prevail on the part of low society, women, and girls,"[43] and the inclination toward "religious superstition" was also "found mostly among women, children, the ignorant as well as low society."[44]

The comparison to women and children, the weakest and most dependent members of society, is significant. Just like women and children, people in "low society" could not speak for themselves—the above assessments, of course, were all made by educated men—or care for themselves: "They are so uncivilized and superstitious that, despite their great number, they just degenerate from day to day—how could one discuss the task of transforming society with them?!"[45]

These claims poignantly illustrate the quandary of social "classes": their separation, although blatantly contradicting the ideal of equality, cannot be denied. The lower classes are ignorant and uncouth, yet they cannot be ignored. Arguably, the discovery of "society" in China meant the discovery of the lower classes, which made up a majority of the 400 million Chinese. Whereas in the old "one-class society," the elite could simply disregard the plight of the common people, they now became more visible than ever before. "The people of low society are several times as numerous as those of high society"; in fact, "they are the masters of the entire country."[46] It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that they *were* society—and that was not heartening news: "if they are not bounded by education, then stupidity, crudeness and vulgarity will characterize our people."[47]

Once "classes" had been conceived as man-made, "transforming society" became not merely an option but an urgent task. However, it was becoming increasingly obvious that

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42 Anon., "Xue nüshi jinqin yanshuo" 薛女士錦琴演說, *Zhongwai ribao* 中外日报 (1901): 下等社會之中, 識字者蓋寡, 廿四朝歷史、十八省地理, 自幼稚而少壯而老大, 眼中耳中腦中, 未嘗經一二之感觸，愛國之心何由而起? (quoted in Sang Bing 2004, 164).

43 Anon., "Ge tian" 革天, *Guomin riri bao* 國民日日報 (1903): 凡風俗之弊害，莫不偏於下流社會婦人女子之一部分 (in Zhang and Wang 1960, vol. 2, 717).

44 Anon., "Zhen nuli" 箴奴隸, *Guomin riri bao* 國民日日報 (1903): 中國人之奉宗教者，多在婦孺無知及下流社會之一部 (in Zhang and Wang 1960, vol. 2, 706).

45 Anon., "Zhen nuli": 其野蠻迷信，為數雖眾，而只日見墮落，何足與言轉移社會之事 (Zhang and Wang 1960, vol. 2, 706).

46 Li Shucheng 1903, 453: 下等社會為一國之主人。

47 Yunwo 1903, 555–56: 下流社會之人數必倍蓰於上流社會，苟無教育以範圍之，則蠢陋庸劣皆吾國民類。

leadership was to be expected neither from the ruling dynasty nor from the "high society" associated with it: "Those holding office have no patriotic mind, they only strive to protect their own individual wealth and status,"[48] a contemporary commentator complained. A Chinese student, Li Shucheng, was even more direct:

> 挾持政柄者，大率皆頑鈍腐敗之魁杰也。彼輩除考據以外無學問，除奔競鑽營以外無閱歷，除美缺優差以外無識見，加之數十年陶熔於宦海，養成一種柔滑狡獪、麻木不知痛痒之性質。
>
> Those in power are mostly dull-witted and corrupt. They possess no learning except for philology; they have no experience, except for that of vying and plotting for their own benefit; they have no knowledge, except for that about well-paid positions and profitable offices—add to that several decades of molding in officialdom, and they develop a slimy and crafty character, numb and insensible to suffering.[49]

In short, "they may be called 'high society,' but in reality, nobody in low society is as bad as they are."[50] There was no help from that side—so where were the "patriots" that could take on the task of "transforming society"?

4 "Classes" Mediated: The Emergence of "Middle Society"

It is noteworthy that the debate about "high" and "low" society unfolded mainly among Chinese students and intellectuals. It did not represent an awareness, much less a movement, that would have emerged *within* those social strata. "Low society" was especially far removed from this discourse. There was as yet no indication that its members felt any sense of identity; there was no popular movement that claimed rights on behalf of the underprivileged; no clubs or associations that fostered an awareness of unity; no tradition of dissent—religious or other—that would have led to class consciousness.[51] Clearly, "high" and "low society" were not self-descriptions but external classifications. They were external also in the sense that they did not surface in China, but in *Japan*: almost all of

48 "Xue nüshi jinqin yanshuo" 薛女士錦琴演說, *Zhongwai ribao* 1901/3/27: 實由居官者無愛國之心，但求保一己之富貴; see Sang Bing 2004, 164.

49 Li Shucheng 1903, 453.

50 Liang Qichao, "Ouzhou zhengzhi gejin zhi yuanyin" 歐洲政治革進之原因 (1913): 故名則上流社會，而實則下流莫此為甚 (in Liang Qichao 2011, *Wenji* 30, 44).

51 This is in stark contrast to English society, where in the eighteenth century there was "a mixture of men of all opinions, Anabaptists, Quakers, Presbyterians, Arians, Antinomians, Moravians and what not," that criticized the church for its "neglect of the poor, ignorant, perishing multitude" (Thompson 1966, 36).

the contributions quoted above appeared in newspapers published in Tōkyō or Yokohama.[52] In Japan, Chinese students acquired the entire vocabulary of modernity, including the concept of "society" and its concomitants. They probably heard of Ogyū Sorai's (1666–1728) refutation of the old hierarchic order:

> The principle that the entire world should be organized into four classes of gentlemen-scholars, peasants, artisans, and merchants was also established by the Ancient Sages. *The four classes did not exist naturally in heaven and on earth*.[53]

They witnessed the equalization of social strata during the Meiji reforms, the success of the newfound national consciousness in Japan, and they were surely aware of Yoshida Shōin's (1831–1860) critique of the Qing regime:

> If they could have unified the hearts of high and low, promoted the righteous and brave, and cut out the nefarious and fawning, encroachment by foreign barbarians would never have taken place.[54]

This judgment was echoed in Baihua Daoren's complaint, quoted above, that "high society does not connect with low society": this disconnection was at the heart of all social problems that beset China. To be sure, Japan also had its share of "social problems" (*shakai mondai*), and "the broken harmony of society"[55]—in other words: the alienation of classes—was intensely discussed in the late Meiji period. Members of the new urban middle class—"civil servants, professionals, educators, journalists, managers, and office workers"—in particular, took the initiative of addressing "social problems" and "articulat[ing] a vision of society in which they functioned as the principal promoters of national progress."[56] The Japanese "middle society" (*chūtō shakai*) successfully presented itself as a principal carrier of "social knowledge" that "functioned not simply to support a given social order, but in fact to constitute that order."[57] They were the self-proclaimed core of Japanese society.

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52 For an overview of Chinese newspapers, 1900–1918, see Ding Shouhe 1982–87; for Chinese students in Japan, see Sanetō Keishū 1983.

53 Quoted in Maruyama 1974, 214 (emphasis in original). The author compares the shift from Zhu Xi's thought, which postulated a natural social order, to Ogyū Sorai's argument that social order is created by man to the shift from mediaeval to modern thought in Europe (Maruyama 1974, 223–38).

54 Quoted in Wakabayashi 1992, 20.

55 Ishida 2008, 75–76.

56 Ambaras 1998, 2–3.

57 Ambaras 1998, 3.

Chinese students could not fail to notice the importance of this middle class. Through Japanese translations, they also learned of Aristotle's insight that "the political community administered by the middle class is the best [...] for by throwing in its weight it sways the balance and prevents the opposite extremes from coming into existence."[58] It must have seemed obvious that China, too, needed an effective "middle society" in order to catch up with the modern world:

> 支那民族經營革命之事業者，必以下等社會為根據地，而以中等社會為運動場。是故下等社會者，革命事業之中堅也，中等社會者，革命事業之前列也。
>
> Those Chinamen that engage in the revolutionary enterprise must make low society their basis and make middle society their playground. Thus low society is the core and middle society is the forefront of the revolutionary enterprise.[59]

However, precisely this class appeared to be missing in China. Liang Qichao observed that in Chinese history, quite unlike in European history, "there have been revolutions by high society and low society, but no revolution by the middle society";[60] and among Japanese scholars it became "a common view over the next few decades" that China lacked "a healthy middle society."[61]

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58 Aristotle, *Politics* IV.ix.8, 331. Liang Qichao, no doubt informed by Japanese translations, quotes Aristotle's views in "Yalishiduode zhi zhengzhi xueshuo" 亞里士多德之政治學說 (1902): "The people, no matter in which polity, can generally be divided into three strata. The first consists of the wealthy and noble, also called 'high society.' The second consists of the poor and mean, also called 'low society.' The third consists of those situated between wealthy and poor, noble and mean, also called 'middle society.' In the entire polity, high society is usually the least numerous, low society is usually the most numerous, and middle society, again, is usually in between. [...] Therefore it is best to stay in between the two extremes and let political power rest with the second most numerous, the middle society: then they can reconcile the two other classes and the basis of the polity will be stable." (無論何國之民，大率可區為三級。一曰富而貴者，假名曰上等社會。二曰貧而賤者，假名曰下等社會。三曰在富與貧、貴與賤之間者，假名曰中等社會。一國之中，上等社會常最少數，下等社會常最多數，而中等社會亦常在其中。[...] 故莫如執兩端而用其中，使國之政權，常在次多數之中等社會，則常能調和彼兩階級，而國本以固矣, in Liang Qichao 2011, *Wenji* 12, 76–77.)

59 Takamura Tsuneo et al. 1903, 408–9.

60 Liang Qichao, "Zhongguo lishi shang geming zhi yanjiu" 中國歷史上革命之研究 (1904): 有上等下等社會革命，而無中等社會革命 (in: Liang Qichao 2011, *Wenji* 15, 32). Cf. also Chen Tianhua 陳天華, "Zhongguo geming shi lun" 中國革命史論 (*Minbao* 民報 1 and 2, 1905), who follows up on this observation.

61 Fogel 1995, 100, quoting Takase Bintoku's 高瀨敏德, *Hoku-Shin kenbunroku* 北清見聞録

Fortunately, this middle society was soon to be found. Unsurprisingly, the very authors of the above-quoted diagnoses, students and young intellectuals, claimed that *they themselves* constituted this pivotal "middle society." To be sure, the definition of the newfound "middle society" was anything but clear-cut. Liang Qichao on one occasion defined "middle society" as "officials who are not accomplished, scholars without official positions, and merchants who have become moderately prosperous,"[62] and on another occasion claimed that "citizens of good repute are called 'middle society,'" whereas "bandits are called 'lower society.'"[63] Yang Yulin (1872–1911), a Chinese student in Japan, included in the definition "those between merchants and scholars" as well as "those between martial artists and scholars."[64]

In "middle society," we encounter the first *self-description* of a Chinese social class. Just like in Europe, this "middle class is a self-conscious interposition between persons of *rank* and the *common people*."[65] With students and intellectuals at its core, this concept differed substantially from the traditional order. Membership in the "middle society" was primarily attributed to *individuals*, not to families. For the disembedded Chinese in Japan, in particular, living far from their families, it made sense to consider themselves as individuals—and, of course, there were no "student families" one could be born into.[66]

(1902). This opinion was repeated by Okuda Takematsu 奥田竹松, writing around 1907: 支那人は[...]健全なる中等社会を欠けり (quoted in Lü Shunzhang 2010, 74); and as late as 1913, a certain Wu Tao (or: Gotō?) 吳濤 held that "China only has two classes, the rich and the poor, but no middle class" 支那僅有貧富二階級，無中等社會 (Wu Tao 1913). Note the combination of *jieji* and *zhongdeng shehui* in one sentence. On the Chinese concept of "middle society," see Chen Xulu 1991, 257–76.

62 "Yadian xiao shi" 雅典小史 (1902): 中等社會者何。則宦而未達者，學而未仕者，商而致小康者，皆是已 (in Liang Qichao 2011, *Zhuanji* 16, 8).

63 Liang Qichao, "Zhonguo lishi shang geming zhi yanjiu" (1904): 起事者為善良之市民，命之曰中等，其為盜賊，命之曰下等 (in Liang Qichao 2011, *Wenji* 15, 34).

64 Yang Dusheng 1903, 629: 諸君占中等社會之位置，唯自居於士類者成一大部分，而出入於商與士之間者附屬焉，出入於方術技擊與士類之間者附屬焉。

65 Williams 1985, 63. See the "self-congratulatory description" of the English middle class in 1831: "by the people, I mean the middle classes, the wealth and intelligence of the country, the glory of the British name" (Williams 1985, 63). A similar self-satisfaction may be discerned in the descriptions of "middle society."

66 It has been argued, in the European context, that the focus on individuals made the lower classes appear as a relevant factor for the first time: "As long as social differentiation was conceived as differentiation of families, they were not taken into consideration for that very reason: their families had nothing to bequeath, nothing to preserve, they meant nothing" (Luhmann 1985, 126). It remains to be shown whether this applied to the Chinese case.

Moreover, it was explicitly noted that people could gradually *rise* from "lower society" into "middle society."[67] Education was key: It marked the difference between "high society" and "low society," and students as well as intellectuals occupied a privileged place in the middle. They were certainly not as ignorant as people of "low society," but neither did they claim the classical scholarship of "high society." The members of "middle society" "possess thoughts," as Liang Qichao phrased it,[68] and this was quite different from the doctrinal learning of premodern China. "Thought" (*sixiang*) reckoned with contingency; it was a specifically modern concept associated with the new and the progressive: this is precisely what "middle society" stood for.[69]

In all of this, "middle society" was distinctly *modern*. Its education was modern—that is, technical, scientific—predominantly Western, and its media were modern. Journals were the most important medium of communication, which allowed "middle society" to present its messages in simple, direct, and colloquial form and on a large scale.[70] Most importantly, its state of mind was modern: the enlightened gentry, intellectuals, and students were decidedly *progressive*.[71] "Middle society" was a dynamic concept, oriented not toward the past (to the ancestry of a family) but toward the *future*, toward individual careers and the reform of society. Students were "the leaders of reform," even "the future leaders of China," as Liang Qichao claimed in 1902.[72] Their duty—like that of Japan's

67 Liang Qichao, "Zhonguo lishi shang geming zhi yanjiu" (1904): 或由下等而漸進為中等，不能計也 (in: Liang Qichao 2011, *Wenji* 15, 32). Incidentally, this closely resembles the—equally modern—principle of evolution, according to which "humankind has gradually evolved from lower species" (人類亦從下等動物漸次進化而來, Liang Qichao, "Tianyan xue chuzu Da'erwen zhi xueshuo ji qi lüezhuan" 天演學初祖達爾文之學說及其略傳 [1902], in Liang Qichao 2011, *Wenji* 13, 17).

68 Liang Qichao, "Lun zhengzhi nengli" 論政治能力, *Xinmin congbao* 1905.62: 既有思想之中等社會 (in Liang Qichao 2011, *Zhuanji* 4, 156).

69 "Thought cannot be anything but new," Liang Qichao emphasized ("Benguan diyibai ce zhuci bing lun baoguan zhi zeren ji benguan zhi jingli" 本館第一百册祝辭並論報館之責任及本館之經歷 (*Qingyi bao* 1901): 故思想不可以不新 (in Zhang and Wang 1960, vol. 1, 45); and an article entitled "Old Morality and New Thought" 舊道德與新思想 (Anon., *Shenbao* 1914.12.20) states that "morality takes the old as its substance, whereas thought takes the new as its essence" (蓋道德自以舊者為厚而思想則以新者為精). I have dealt with this at length in Vogelsang 2022.

70 See Judge 1997, 9. This constellation constituted what Joan Judge called the "new middle realm" (which is a pun on the "Middle Kingdom," a name for China itself).

71 "Progress," of course, was another new concept at the time; see Fröhlich and Schneider 2020.

72 Liang Qichao, "Jinggao liuxuesheng zhujun" 敬告留學生諸君, (1902): 最敬最愛之中國將來主人翁 (in Liang Qichao 2011, *Wenji* 11, 21). Cf. also Yuan Yun 愿云 (i.e.

"middle society"—was to integrate the divergent classes of modern China. Thus Yang Dusheng appealed to "the middle class of Hunan" to "replace high society and act in the name of low society. It is your duty to guide low society and rectify high society; and it is also your duty to shatter high society and nourish low society."[73] In the same vein, the young revolutionary Li Shucheng wrote an impassioned clarion call to students in Japan:

> 學生介於上等社會、下等社會之中間，為過度最不可少之人。上等社會既誤於前，崩潰決裂，俱待繼起者收拾之。為今日之學生者，當豫勉為革新之健將，使異日放一大光彩，以照耀於亞洲大陸之上，毋使一誤再誤，終罹亡國之禍，以為歷史羞。前途茫茫排山倒海之偉業，俱擔荷於今日學生之七尺軀，則對上等社會所負之責任重也。下等社會為一國之主人，如何使完其人格，如何使盡其天職，必養其獨立自營之精神，而後能為世界之大國民，以立於萬馬奔騰潮聲洶涌之競爭場而不踣。今日之學生，即下等社會之指向鐵也，則對下等社會所負之責任重也。
>
> The students are situated right in the middle between high and low society, they are intermediate people who are absolutely not to be belittled. High society has already failed as a vanguard; having disintegrated and fallen apart, they await their successors to put things in order. Today's students should prepare to be the leaders of reform, so that one day they may bring about great glory that shines upon the continent of Asia, and so that failure shall not be repeated and eventually lead to the disaster of national destruction and historical humiliation. The enormous, earth-shaking tasks of the future are all burdened on the shoulders of today's students: the responsibility they carry for high society is heavy, indeed. The people in low society are the : how can they be brought to perfect their human qualities, and how can they be brought to fulfill their heavenly duties? Only when their spirit of independence and self-reliance is fostered can they become in the world and stand their ground in the arena of fierce and relentless competition. Today's students are the guiding compass for low society: the responsibility they carry for low society is heavy, indeed.[74]

Jiang Zhiyou 蔣智由, 1865–1929), Liang's fellow reformer, who observed that "nowadays in China, those who talk about reform are all educated people from middle society" (Yuan Yun 1903).

73 Yang Dusheng 1903, 615: 諸君在湖南之位置，實下等社會之所托名而上等社會之替人也。提挈下等社會以矯正上等社會者，惟君之責，破壞上等社會以卵翼下等社會者，亦為諸君之責。For this passage as well as discussions of the concept of "middle society," see Sang Bing 2004 and Min Xinhui 2019, 88–93.

74 Li Shucheng 1903, 453: 下等社會為一國之主人。

"Middle society" owed its very existence to the "high" and "low" society, and bore responsibilities towards those latter. Its members were "intermediate people"; indeed, they were *intermediaries*. Mediating between "high" and "low" society, they had to bridge the divide between the two extremes. In this sense, they were still credited with much of the moral quality that was inherent in the old estates.[75] But unlike the old elites, "middle society" was not expected to preserve the social order but to *change* it through reform or revolution.[76]

To this end, they turned not to "high society," which had been thoroughly discredited, but to "low society": it was the great multitude they wanted to arouse to action, thereby shifting power from the upper classes downward, as it were:

> 吾欲鼓吹革命主義於名為上等社會之人，而使之翕受，終不可得矣；吾乃轉眼而望諸平民。
>
> If we wanted to propagate revolutionary ideas among those people that are called "high society," expecting them to happily receive them, it could never be done. Therefore, we turn our eyes and look towards the common people.[77]

It is worth noting that, in contrast to European history, Chinese attention to "low society" had little to do with poverty, inequality, or the plight of the common people. Whereas in nineteenth-century Europe, poverty and labor increasingly became a subject of art (Courbet), literature (Dickens), poetry (Heine), social movements (Hambach Festival), journalism, and legislation, they received comparatively little attention in China before the revolution of 1911. The commitment of "middle society" to "low society" was not driven by care and empathy—the condescending talk of their "stupidity, crudeness and vulgarity" suggests the opposite—but by a newfound national consciousness. Not the conditions of "low society" were at issue, but the state of the nation.

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75 See the description by Fairbank 1983, 33–6: "The gentry families [...] constituted a stratum of families based on landed property which intervened between the earth-bound masses of the peasantry, on the one hand, and the officials and merchants who formed a fluid matrix of overall administrative and commercial activity, on the other. [...] The local official dealt with conditions of flood or famine or incipient rebellion and the multitude of minor criminal cases and projects for public works, all through the help of the gentry community. It was the buffer between populace and officialdom."

76 Chen Xulu 1991, 257, stresses that "the people of the revolutionary party came from 'middle society' and also represented 'middle society.'"

77 Zhuangyou 1903, 7. See also Chen Tianhua 1905: 故今日惟有使中等社會皆知革命主義，漸普及下等社會。斯時也，一夫發難，萬眾響應，其於事何難焉。

While the discourse of "high," "middle," and "low society" was not driven by empathy, it had nothing to do with divisive class struggle, either. Rather, it was all about a national struggle that *united* all three "societies."[78] This is significant: despite the inherent inequality represented by the threefold division, "society" was nonetheless clearly conceived as a unity; and although the concept of "high, low, and middle societies" implied difference, it certainly did not imply *in*difference. Quite the contrary: it represented a new form of *interdependence* between unequal parts of society. Like it or not, the masses of "low society" influenced the fate of the entire nation: "if they are not bounded by education, then stupidity, crudeness and vulgarity will characterize our people."[79]

Not surprisingly, "education"—the distinctive trait of "middle society"—was thought to hold the solution to national unity. It behooved "middle society" to enlighten the members of "low society," mold them into citizens and make them participate in the national enterprise. The most explicit exhortation to "renew the people" was Liang Qichao's *Xinmin shuo* (published in installments in *Xinmin congbao*, 1902–05) which made an appeal for the values Chinese citizens needed to acquire: "public virtue," a sense of "rights" and "freedom," "national consciousness," and the "spirit of independence and self-reliance" it took to become "citizens of a great country" (see p. 17). The *Xinmin shuo* was a veritable textbook for the educational program of "middle society." However, it proved to be overly optimistic. In the very last installment of the *Xinmin shuo*, published in 1905, Liang Qichao summed up the discourse of "middle society" in a rather disillusioned way:

> 國民者其所養之客體也，而必更有其能養之主體。[...] 主體何在？不在強有力之當道，不在大多數之小民，而在既有思想之中等社會，[...] 國民所以無能力，則由中等社會之無能力。
>
> National citizens are the object of cultivation, so there must be a subject that can cultivate them. [...] Where is this subject to be found? Not among the strong and powerful office-holders, and not among the vast majority of the petty people, but among thought-possessing middle society. [...] If the national citizens have no abilities then it is because middle society has no abilities.[80]

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78 Incidentally, this supports the sociological insight that "stable hierarchies require at least three levels" (Luhmann 1985, 124). An intermediary middle class serves as the crucial stabilizing element in society, integrating upper and lower classes, thus making social order and progress possible (see Giesen 1991, 24–5, and 32–7; Giesen 1987, 317f.).

79 Yunwo 1903, 555–56 (cf. above, fn. 47).

80 Liang Qichao, *Xinmin shuo* 20 ("Lun zhengzhi nengli" 論政治能力), in Liang Qichao 2011, *Zhuanji* 4, 156.

The problem, Liang continues, is not how to instill political abilities in others but how to cultivate it *in middle society itself*. In these lines, the enthusiasm of "middle society" discourse has evaporated. For Liang Qichao, the moment of disillusion came when he left the academic circles of Japan and was confronted with the reality of life in US Chinatowns;[81] for others, it may have come when the discourse of "middle society" left the intellectual bubble of Japan and was confronted with the reality of life in China itself. Yang Du, writing in 1907, noted that

> 今中國之中流社會與各立憲國之中流社會其程度孰為高下？則將應之曰：彼高而我下。[...] 故余於主張開國會之時，不能不同時而呼起中流社會之責任心，俾勿視國事為過難，而還退入於個人主義家族思想也。
>
> Comparing China's middle society with the middle society of constitutional states, whose level is higher? The answer will have to be: theirs is higher, ours is lower. [...] Therefore, every time I argue for establishing a parliament, I cannot but simultaneously appeal to middle society's sense of responsibility, lest they regard state affairs as overly difficult and retreat to individualism and familism.[82]

Familism was back, and the idealized "middle society" did not seem to live up to its promise. Perhaps the entire discourse of "middle society," which largely took place in newspapers, was self-referential from the beginning: even years later, "most citizens did not read papers, whereas people from middle society mostly read some paper."[83] While "middle society" simply engaged with itself, China's cities saw the rise of new urban elites that were not defined by education but by wealth. Now, merchants not only rose in economic status but also as civic leaders. "In 1905, for example, when the Shanghai city council was established [...] fully twenty of the thirty-eight representatives came from merchant backgrounds"; and chambers of commerce, over a thousand of which had been established in China's cities by 1912, "assumed political and administrative functions in their cities, becoming 'the key organization in the urban life of Republican China, central to the running of many cities.'"[84] This commercialization of the elite undermined the discourse of "middle society." "The people of middle society constantly show off

81 See his *Xin dalu youji* (in Liang Qichao 2011, *Zhuanji* 22, 122).

82 "Jintie zhuyi shuo" 金鐵主義說, in Yang Du 2015, 155, 160.

83 Anon., "Guoti huiyi huizhi" 國體會議彙誌, *Dagong bao* (1922/07/31): 因公民多不看報，而中級社會人，又多看某報。

84 Eastman 1988, 196 (quoting Shirley S. Garrett in the last sentence). Cf. Bergère 1983, 730: "In 1912 the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce listed 794 main and subsidiary chambers of commerce mustering 196,636 members."

their luxury," Liang Qichao complained in 1910, "even a petty government officer will in a single room display items that cost as much as the tax payments of ten average families, and a single feast costs as much as half a year's statutory salary."[85] This was a far cry from the integrative ideals of "middle society": "the future leaders of China" no longer defined themselves by education but by wealth.[86] The idealistic "middle society" gradually transformed into a materialistic "bourgeoisie" (*zhongchan jieji*). With that, their credibility as social reformers was lost, as Cai Hesen acidly remarked: "Those scholars from the bourgeoisie fantasize about social reform and fancy controlling the world with their individual brains: [...] this is extremely foolish."[87]

With hope in "middle society" fading, the entire discourse of "high," "middle," and "low" society gradually petered out. Significantly, it did not evolve into a discourse of "class" as such: the terms "high," "middle," and "low society" designated *specific* strata of society, but they did not yet express an abstract concept of "class." They had not yet turned into a "collective singular," as Reinhart Koselleck put it: into "class" as such, which would subsume all classes and could be reflected upon and debated as a concept. This problem is apparent in the terminology itself. A general concept of "class" could not be formed by abstracting from *shangdeng shehui*, *zhongdeng shehui*, and *xiadeng shehui*, since *shehui*, by itself, meant "society," not "class." It took another term for "class" to come into its own:

> 社會之階級，其大略有三等，上中等社會人數較少而識見較易開通，下等社會人數較多而識見較易蒙蔽。
>
> There are, generally speaking, three *classes* in society: high and middle society, whose numbers are comparatively small but who are easily enlightened, and low society, whose numbers are comparatively large but who are easily deceived.[88]

So *jieji* was the abstraction that came to signify "class" as such. While the discourse of "high," "middle," and "low society" dwindled, this new term gained currency. Not only

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85 "Shuo guofeng" 說國風 (1910): 今也全國國民富力，視前此有日蹙而无日舒，而中流社會之人，日相炫以豪華，雖以區區一曹郎，而一室之陳設耗中人十戶之賦，一席之飲宴，值《會典》半年之俸，而其尤宦達者更無論也 (in Liang Qichao 2011, *Wenji*, 二十五下).

86 This is clearly borne out by a number of articles in the early 1920s that analyze the "livelihood" of "middle society" households, focusing primarily on their economic means; cf. Mao Peijie 2018, 6–11.

87 Cai Hesen 1921a: 自來一般中產階級學者或空想的社會改造家，好以他個人的頭腦來支配世界... 這真愚妄極了。

88 Anon., "Beijing xuejie tongzhi jingao quanguo xuesheng wen" 北京學界同志敬告全國學生文, *Dagong bao* 1905, 1–2.

was "middle society" now redefined in economic terms as *zhongchan jieji*, but the entire understanding of social inequality was significantly altered. *Jieji* marked a new stage in the conceptual history of "class."

5 "Classes" Galore: The New Confusion

The Chinese word *jieji* is a loan from the Japanese *kaikyū*, which was a translation of the English "class."[89] It gradually entered the Chinese language at the turn of the twentieth century. As mentioned above, Liang Qichao was probably the first to use the term when, in 1899, he claimed that "in Europe, it [was] common to divide the people of a nation into classes, whereas in China it [was] not."[90] This statement was characteristic of the early discourse of "class": far from being rooted in Chinese history, the concept was, at the beginning of the twentieth century, employed mainly to describe the structure of *foreign* societies. Chinese intellectuals held that "in European antiquity there were only class states,"[91] and that, whereas "America certainly [had] economic classes, China [did] not."[92] The term was associated with the Indian castes and with European antiquity;[93] and one author claimed that "the Russian people may be divided into three classes: first, the ones that build bombs, second, the ones that throw bombs, third, the ones that are hit by bombs."[94]

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89 Of course, the *word jieji* was also used in other ways, notably in the sense of historical or evolutionary "stages." These semasiological aspects will not concern us here.

90 Cf. fn. 7, above. Cf. also Liang Qichao's, "Lun xueshu zhi shili zuoyou shijie" 論學術之勢力左右世界 (1902): 歐洲古來有階級制度之習。一切政權教權皆為貴族所握。平民則視若奴隸焉 (in Liang Qichao 2011, *Wenji* 6, 112). Liang also claims that, whereas in premodern Europe people were subject to different legislation according to their class, whereas in China everyone (except the emperor) was equal before the law ("Guojia sixiang bianqian yitong lun" 國家思想變遷異同論 [1901], in Liang Qichao 2011, *Wenji* 6, 12).

91 Yuchen zi 1903, 343: 歐洲古時皆階級之國也。

92 Hu Hanmin 1906, 10: 美國猶有經濟的階級，而中國亦無之。

93 Anon., "Lun Zhongguo jieji zhidu lu" 論中國階級制度錄, *Dongfang zahi* 東方雜誌 1904.6, 102–6: 昔印度當上古之時區國民為四級。而希臘羅馬各邦亦有貴族平民之別。是階級制度。It may be noted that in Europe, too, "classis was primarily used in explicit reference to Roman history, and was then extended, first as a term in church organization ('assemblies are either classes or synods', 1593) and later as a general term for a division or group ('the classis of Plants', 1664)" (Williams 1985, 60).

94 Anon., "Eguo renmin zhi san jieji" 俄國人民之三階級, *Tongwen bao* 259 [1907], 7. This evidently refers to Lenin's model of proletarians, revolutionary elite, and the old bourgeoisie.

"Class" was a decidedly foreign concept. The *Xin Erya*, a dictionary of neologisms compiled by Chinese students in Japan in 1903 introduces *jieji* as a *new* term:

> 區分人群為數等，謂之階級。享群中優特權利之階級，謂之貴族。不能有完全人格，與物類同待遇之階級，謂之奴隸。
>
> The division of human groups into several ranks is called "class." The class that enjoys special privileges within the group is called "aristocracy." The class that does not possess full human dignity and is treated like things is called "slaves."[95]

The entry makes clear not only that the term *jieji*—in the sense of "class"—was foreign to the Chinese language but that it was not yet clearly defined: what the *Xin Erya*—and quite a few other early uses of the term—refers to is clearly not "classes" but *estates*.[96] But however fuzzy its definition was, "class" was now conceived as an *abstraction*: no longer dependent on a modifier, *jieji* designated "class" as such. Not only the role of specific "societies" but "the division of human groups into several ranks" could now be the subject of reflection, discussion, and criticism. Indeed, criticism engaged with the concept from the very beginning. "Class" had a pejorative ring to it: Indian castes, bombings, slavery—these were no pleasant associations. Liang Qichao, writing in 1902, put it plainly:

> 四民平等問題，中國無有也，以吾自戰國以來即廢世卿之制，而階級陋習，早已消滅也。
>
> The problem of equality of the four estates did not exist in China because, ever since hereditary offices were abolished in the Warring States period, the contemptible tradition of classes was also eliminated.[97]

The "contemptible tradition of classes" does not sound like the good order of premodern estates, nor does it resemble the integrative discourse of "high," "middle," and "low" society. "Class" was not an integrative but a *divisive* concept. It stood for the harmful disunity and inequality of society:

> 依國法言立憲國之精神，國民之權利義務莫不平等一致。然法理上固應如是而事實上又有不能盡同。此階級問題所由起也。

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95 *Xin Erya* 1977, 68.

96 In other words, it treats estates as "classes," implying that they are not preordained but man-made. See also above, p. 3, and, for the same conflation with reference to England, see Anon., "Yingguo ge jieji de tezhi" 英國各階級的特質, *Dalu* 大陆 1902.3, 1–2.

97 "Lun ziyou" 論自由 (1902), in: Liang Qichao 2011, *Zhuanji* 4, 44.

> According to the spirit of the national law that calls for establishing a constitutional state, the rights and duties of the national citizens are all equal and identical. But although this should be the case according to legal principle, reality is not quite like this. It is from this that the problem of class arises.[98]

This paragraph may have been taken from a textbook of conceptual history. It shows how concepts gain plausibility by reference to other concepts: the ideal of "equality" was an *anticipatory* concept—"reality is not quite like this"—and the concept of "class" reacted to precisely this problem. It expressed the dilemma that modern society, on the one hand, makes the theoretical claim to equality but, one the other hand, does not live up to its promise in practice. Whereas the "high," "middle," and "low society" may have had specific problems—for example, lack of empathy or education—"classes" *were* a problem in themselves: the very existence of "classes" indicated the pathological condition of society.[99] "Class" implied oppression. An intellectual who went by the pseudonym Han Ju, or "Colt of the Han," put it thus:

> 自由鐘振而專制之妖氛滅絕，平等旗張而階級之毒燄掃清，所謂平民政治者，乃大出現於十九世紀 [...] 回顧吾國其奚若乎？專制妖氛瀰漫全國，階級毒焰深中人心。
>
> When the bell of freedom rang out [in Europe], the evil spirit of despotism was eradicated, the banner of equality flew, and the toxic fervor of class was extinguished. The so-called "government by the people" made its great appearance in the nineteenth century. [...] But looking back at our country, what happened here? The evil spirit of despotism spread across the entire country, and the toxic fervor of class penetrated deeply into people's minds.[100]

The concept of "class" expressed an unjust hierarchical order that was no longer accepted as "the bedrock of the state." Instead, it was vilified as "despotism."[101] Interestingly, intellectuals like Han Ju argued that "class" was by no means just a foreign concept and that even China was not free of its "toxic fervor." The concept was now projected

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98 Xu Jun 1920.

99 Again, this corresponds to the emerging concept of a "society" (*shehui*) in which "there is not a single part that is not pathological" (實鑒於今日之全社會，幾無一部分而無病態也; Liang Qichao, *Xinmin shuo* 18 ["Lun side" 論私德], in: Liang Qichao 2011, *Zhuanji* 4, 131); cf. Vogelsang 2012.

100 Han Ju 1903, 584–5.

101 On the concept of "despotism," which Liang Qichao, inspired by Montesquieu, introduced to reevaluate China's political system, see the article by Paul Fahr in this issue.

back in time, and "the contemptible tradition of classes" was detected in Chinese history. No lesser man than Confucius was associated with the consolidation of a "class system":

> 孔氏主尊卑貴賤之階級制度，由天尊地卑演而為君尊臣卑，父尊子卑，夫尊婦卑，官尊民卑，尊卑既嚴，貴賤遂別，幾無一事不含有階級之精神意味，故二千年來不能剷除階級制度。
>
> Confucius advocated the class system of superior and inferior, noble and mean. From the fact that heaven is superior and earth inferior, it extended to consider the father as superior and the son as inferior, the husband as superior and the wife as inferior, officials as superior and the people as inferior; and from these strict distinctions followed the differentiation of noble and mean, so that there was almost nothing that was not imbued with the spirit of class. Therefore, for 2,000 years, the class system has been impossible to eradicate.[102]

The "class system" seemed intricately linked to Chinese society; it was the birth defect of the Confucian system: the erstwhile "good order" now appeared downright vile. In this sense, *jieji* certainly did not carry the promise of mediation inherent in "middle society." Rather, it was a contentious concept: "classes" could not be reconciled, they were an obstacle, which had to be abolished in order to create a more equitable social structure. The Chinese, "fettered by the class system for all their lives," had to "abolish the old class system that has been in place for several millennia in order to organize the citizens of the entire country into a new society."[103] "Class" now became an integral part not only of reformist but also of *revolutionary* discourse. The "Colt of the Han" and his fellow nationalist revolutionaries were instrumental in disseminating the concept. For example, Zhang Taiyan claimed that "if the government is toppled, the elites are defeated, classes crumble, capital is dispersed and livelihoods equalized, only then will there be equality under heaven."[104] Hu Hanmin put it bluntly:

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102 Wu Yu 1917, 10. Others lamented that "ignorant, crude scholars adopted the Confucians's theory of differences in class status" (Anon., "Zhongguo gudai xianyi junquan zhi fa" 中國古代限抑君權之法 [1903]: 無識陋儒, 采儒家阶級尊卑之說, in Zhang and Wang 1960, 734), whereas "Mozi resented it, basing his teaching on universal solidarity, so that the principle of equality would became clear and the class system could be shattered" (Jue Fo 1904, 866: 墨子痛之, 以兼愛立教而平等之旨昭， 而階級之制可破). This projection of the concept into history is also seen in English-language scholarship: see Ch'ü 1957.

103 Dunyuan 1904, 958, 960: 而國民終其身束縛於階級制度之下，[...] 去數千年故有之舊階級制度，以組織全國國民一新社會。

104 "Zong tongmeng bagong lun xu" 總同盟罷工論序 (1907): 如是則政府崩， 豪民潰，

> 今惟撲滿，而一切之階級無不平（美國猶有經濟的階級，而中國亦無之）其立憲也，視之各國，有其易耳，無難焉也。
>
> Now if we only overthrow the Manchu, then there will be no inequality left among the classes (America still has economic classes, China does not), the establishment of a constitution will be easier than in all other countries and present no difficulties.[105]

However, the matter was not quite that straightforward. Class inequalities were not easily abolished; in fact, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, countless new "classes" were identified. Apart from the ruling "aristocratic class," there were the classes of the rich and the poor,[106] gender classes,[107] the "intellectual class,"[108] the "working class" and the "proletarian class,"[109] the "feudal class,"[110] as well as the "literati class,"[111] even a "vagrant class."[112] It was said that the bureaucrats "clearly [made] up a class,"[113] and that "the peasants [were] an extremely large class in China."[114] Xu Jun distinguished between "racial classes," "religious classes," "military classes," "economic classes," and "educational classes";[115] Liang Qichao claimed that "those who rule others are a class, and

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階級墮，資用散，生分均而天下始玄同矣 (Zhang Taiyan 1985, vol. 4, 384).

105 Hu Hanmin 1906, 10.

106 Liang Qichao, "Waizi shuru wenti" 外資輸入問題 (*Xinmin congbao* 1904): 若外資入中國後，而此兩懸絕階級緣而發生也，則其最少數之極富一階級，全屬外國人，而吾國民則皆屬於最大多數之極貧一階級者也 (in: Zhang and Wang 1960, 734).

107 He Zhen 何震, "*Tianyi bao* guanggao" 天義報廣告 (*Nüzi shijie* 1907): 世界固有之階級，以男女階級為嚴 (in Xia Xiaohong 2015, 137).

108 Wu Dingchang 1923 portrays them as the future leaders: 智識階級者一國之先覺應以正大光明之態度指示國民將來之途徑者也。

109 See Huang Dongya 2003, 64, who points out that these terms were latecomers, replacing 勞動者, 平民, and 貧民 around 1906.

110 Hu Shi, "Women zou natiao lu" 我們走哪條路 (1930): 封建階級 (quoted in Huang Dongya 2003, 71).

111 Chen 1920: 我們士大夫階級斷然是没有革新希望的。

112 Liang Qichao 1921.

113 "Lun Zhongguo zhengdang neige dang yingshi fasheng" 論中國政黨內閣當應時發生, in Zhang Shizhao 2015, 55: 吾國官僚，固顯然為一階級，然此乃形式的階級，非精神的階級也。

114 Sun Yatsen, "Zai Guangzhou nongmin yundong jiangxisuo diyijie xueyuan biyeli ji dierjie xueyuan kaixueli de yanshuo" 在廣州農民運動講習所第一屆學員畢業禮暨第二屆學員開學禮的演說 (1924): 農民就是中國的一個極大階級 (in Sun Yatsen 2015, 452).

115 Xu Jun 1920: 一人種的階級 ... 二信仰的階級 ... 三武力的階級 ...四財力的階級 ... 五教育的階級。

those who are ruled by others are a class,"[116] and later pitted a "class with guns" against a "class without guns";[117] others opposed the "parasitic class" to the "self-sustaining class," etc.[118]

"Class" was ubiquitous. It was used as a blanket term to describe the multidimensional inequality of modern society.[119] It conflated the remnants of premodern estates, economic strata, gender differences, social milieux, and functional systems.[120] Whereas the discourse of "high," "middle," and "low society" implied a neat tripartite order, Chinese society now appeared crisscrossed by the dividing lines of different "classes." In this new confusion, individuals could no longer be identified with one single class but belonged to several classes:[121] one could simultaneously be a woman, educated, and rich; or a man, a soldier, and poor, etc.[122] Paradoxically, the more conceptual divisions there were, the less

116 "Guojia sixiang bianqian yitong lun" 國家思想變遷異同論 (1901): 治人者為一級，治於人者為一級 (Liang Qichao 2011, *Wenji* 6, 12). See, in the same vein, Sun Yatsen, "Wuquan xianfa" 五權憲法 (1921): 已將治人與治於人底階級打破 (in Sun Yatsen 2015, 63).

117 "Wuqiang jieji dui youqiang jieji" 無槍階級對有槍階級 (*Fazheng xuebao* 法政學報 1922).

118 Zhou Fohai 1919: 把中國人分做兩階級：一個是寄生階級，一個是自給階級. For further examples, cf. the essay by Jiang Lingnan in this issue.

119 Indeed, the term sometimes simply seems to mean "hierarchy"; see He Zhen's assertion that even within the group of women there are "classes": 不獨男女不平等，即女界之中，亦生不平等之階級 ("Nüzi jiefang zhi wenti" 女子解放問題, *Tianyi bao* 1907, in Xia Xiaohong 2015, 190).

120 Hence, it is neither systematically distinguished from "high," "middle," and "low society" nor from social "circles"; cf. pp. 10 and 26.

121 Arguably, the very concept of "individuality," which gained currency in China in this time (see Jin and Liu 2012, 151–79), derives its plausibility from this societal differentiation: "Der Grund dafür ist: daß bei funktionaler Differenzierung die Einzelperson nicht mehr in einem und nur einem Subsystem der Gesellschaft angesiedelt sein kann, sondern sozial ortlos vorausgesetzt werden muß. ... Dieser systemtheoretisch gut faßbare Differenzierungstrend bedeutet für die Einzelperson mehr und mehr Anlaß, die eigene Differenz zur Umwelt ... auf die eigene Person zurückzuinterpretieren, wodurch das Ich zum Focus des Erlebens und die Umwelt relativ konturlos wird" (Luhmann 1985, 16–17).

122 See the observation by Giesen 1987, 319: "Vollends unanschaulich wird das Bild sozialer Ungleichheit, wenn nicht mehr nur eine, sondern mehrere voneinander unabhängige Dimensionen sozialer Ungleichheit ins Auge gefaßt werden sollen. Wenn die Einheit des gesellschaftlichen Standorts für den Einzelnen nicht mehr gewährleistet ist, wenn der Reiche ungebildet, der Arme gebildet und der Mächtige arm sein kann, dann reichen die Anschauungsformen der räumlichen Ordnung nicht mehr aus, um die Struktur sozialer Ungleichheit

divisive they were. The fact that people could associate with several "classes" at the same time led to multiple interconnections between different kinds of "classes." Under such circumstances, class struggle was not a compelling option. The "class problem" could not be solved by one class (which one?) overthrowing the other but only by "abolishing *all* classes and immediately declaring equality."[123]

> 夫居今日之世界，非盡破固有之階級，不得使之反於公；居今日之中國，非男女革命與種族、政治、經濟諸革命並行，亦不得合於真公。
>
> If, in today's world, one does not completely smash the inherent classes, it will be impossible to revert to justice; if, in today's China, the revolution of gender relations is not carried out together with the revolutions of race, politics, and the economy, it will be equally impossible to truly unite in justice.[124]

This remark by He Zhen points to another aspect of the new concept: the "class problem" was an *international* one. Whereas "high," "middle," and "low society" were neatly confined to Chinese society, "classes" transcended national bounds from the very beginning. Not only was "class" initially associated only with foreign societies, foreigners literally brought "classes" to China. Liang Qichao predicted this as early as 1904:

> 若外資入中國後，而此兩懸絕階級緣而發生也，則其最少數之極富一階級，全屬外國人，而吾國民則皆屬於最大多數之極貧一階級者也。何也？此階級以資本家與勞力者為界線也。
>
> When, after foreign capital has entered China, and these two widely separated classes [of the rich and the poor] consequently emerge, then the tiny class of the extremely rich will consist entirely of foreigners, and the people of our county will all belong to the huge class of the extremely poor. Why is that? Because these classes are defined along the lines of capitalists and workers.[125]

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abzubilden [...]."

123 Dawo 1903, 18: 廢一切階級，驟言平等 – adding, however, that this was presently not feasible.

124 He Zhen, "Tianyi bao guanggao" 天義報廣告 (1907), in Xia Xiaohong 2015, 137. For He Zhen, this did not preclude abolishing one class difference first: "If one wants to smash the classes inherent to society, one has to start by smashing the classes of men and women" (故欲破社會固有之階級，必自破男女階級始, ibid.). Zhang Shijian 1919, 486, calls it "smashing classist thought": 改良社會道德，提倡人民獨立，打破階級思想。

125 Liang Qichao, "Waizi shuru wenti" 外資輸入問題 (*Xinmin congbao* 1904, in Zhang and Wang 1960, 822).

Put in Marxist terms, there was no national bourgeoisie in China but only a national proletariat—and even this proletariat was defined by the influx of foreign capital. The idea stuck. Even in the 1920s, Cai Hesen and others argued that "China originally had no upper bourgeoisie" and that this class came to China along with foreign capitalism in the early twentieth century. In fact, "China was completely a state of proletarians," and the capitalist class was brought in by foreign powers: hence "China's class war is actually an international war."[126] This kind of rhetoric, which focused on the possession of capital and pitted the "bourgeoisie" against the "proletariat" in a "class war" marked a new phase in the Chinese discourse of "class": a phase which came to be dominated by Marxist theory.

6 "Classes" Opposed: The Marxist Discourse

The above-mentioned "commercialization of the elite" (see p. 20) reached its climax in the period from 1911 to 1927, which has been called the "golden age of the Chinese bourgeoisie."[127] Rapid urbanization, massive industrialization, and the expansion of trade gave rise to a class of entrepreneurs, bankers, and industrialists in coastal cities such as Shanghai and Canton. By the same token, the ranks of the industrial working class swelled to an unprecedented size: in 1919, they numbered 500,000 in Shanghai alone.[128] The presence of industrial workers, in particular, suggested that they constituted a defining segment of society, and that this "class"—men, women, and children united in their plight—was characterized by *economic* means. The advent of Marxist theory confirmed that these, especially the relation to means of production, were not only an important but actually the *only* criterion that defined classes:

> 所謂階級，就是指經濟上利害相反的階級。具體講出來，地主、資本家是有生產手段的階級，工人、農夫是没有生產手段的階級。
>
> The so-called "classes" are classes that are opposed in their economic interests. Concretely speaking, landlords and capitalists are the class that owns the means of production, whereas workers and peasants are the class that does not own the means of production.[129]

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126 Cai Hesen 1921a: 故以我看來，中國完全是個無產階級的國 [...] 中國的資本階級就是五大強國的資本階級 [...] 中國的階級戰爭就是國際的階級戰爭。

127 Bergère 1983 and 1986.

128 See Mitter 2005, 70.

129 Li Dazhao, "Jieji douzheng yu huzhu" 階級競爭與互助, *Meizhou pinglun* 29 (1919), in: Li Dazhao 2014, 251.

In this context, the other criteria discussed above—gender, education, religion, etc.—were no longer acceptable as constituting "classes": "Precisely because the intellectual class has no particular economic basis," Chen Duxiu remarked, "it does not possess a solid, unswerving class character."[130]

This line of argument not only narrowed down the concept of "class" to economic criteria but also radically reduced the multitude of "classes." Whereas the wider discourse had created "classes" galore, Marxist theory recognized only two basic "classes": "In the entire world today, there exist only two antagonistic classes: namely, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat."[131] To be sure, more fine-grained analyses differentiated between "commercial and industrial bourgeoisie," "bureaucratic bourgeoisie," "small bourgeoisie," "intellectual class," "working class," and others.[132] But the main dividing line was drawn between two opposing classes: "the bourgeoisie and the proletariat," or "the parasitic class and the self-sustaining class," as Zhou Fohai called them.[133]

Marxists took the thought that the lower classes were "the masters of the entire country" (see p. 17) seriously. In their scheme, it was no longer "middle society" but the proletariat that took the initiative. In fact, the polarizing dichotomy left no room for a stabilizing "middle class." In the opposition of oppressors and the oppressed, mediators had no function, moderation was no longer a goal: "The interest of capitalists and workers will always be in conflict and cannot be reconciled."[134] For Marxists, compromise with the bourgeoisie was out of the question; in fact, the very ideal of *equality* had lost its luster, since two antagonistic "classes" could never meet on an equal basis. Li Dazhao, in his 1919 essay on "Class Struggle and Mutual Aid," argued that the anarchist ideal of "mutual aid," which rested on the values of individualism and equality, was diametrically opposed to Marx's theory of "class struggle."[135] Indeed, Liang Mingzhi concluded, "the dictatorship of the workers was a problem on the level of ideas, 'since it wants to elevate one class to topple all other classes. No matter whether the elevated class is the majority or

130 Chen Duxiu 1923, 45: 正因為知識階級没有特殊的經濟基礎，遂没有堅固不搖的階級性。

131 Cai Hesen 1921a: 現今全世界只有兩個敵對的階級存在，就是中產階級與無產階級。

132 See, for example, Chen Duxiu 1923, who mentions the following: 商業工業資產階級, 官僚資產階級, 小資產階級, 知識階級, and 工人階級.

133 Cf. fn. 118.

134 Sun Yatsen, "Minsheng zhuyi: diyi jiang" 民生主義：第一講 (1924), referring to Marxist theory: 資本家和工人的利益總是相衝突，不能調和, in: Sun Yatsen 2015, 392.

135 "Jieji douzheng yu huzhu" 階級競爭與互助 (1919): 與這"互助論"仿佛相反的，還有那"階級競爭" (class struggle) 說, in: Li Dazhao 2014, 250.

the minority, it always violates the principle of equality.'"[136] It comes as no surprise that the ideal of "equality" is conspicuously absent from influential essays such as Li Dazhao's "My View of Marxism" (1919) and Chen Duxiu's "The Chinese National Revolution and the Classes of Society" (1923); nor does the word appear in many other writings concerned with "class struggle."[137] Li Da, writing in 1923, all but dismissed "equality" as a short-term goal:

> 所謂無性別，無宗教別，無人種別，無國民性別之真平等，必經歷勞工專政始能實現，而在資本階級專政期內則絕無實現之可能。
>
> The so-called "real equality," without gender differences, religious differences, racial differences or differences of national character will only be achievable after we have undergone the dictatorship of the workers; during the dictatorship of the capitalist class, there is absolutely no possibility of achieving it.[138]

Paradoxically, the ideal that sparked the discourse of "class" in the first place, "equality," faded out of sight at the point where this discourse had reached its most rigorous stage. The Marxist concept of "class" was more clear-cut and more uncompromising than its predecessors. Its sharply defined division of two opposed "classes" left no room for accommodation. There could be no parity between "capitalists" and the "proletariat." A neutral stance was not admissible, and middle-of-the-roaders had to make up their mind: You're either with us, or against us. "Who are our enemies? Who are our friends?": these questions open Mao Zedong's "Analysis of the Classes of Chinese Society," which gave the Marxist concept of "class" its authoritative version:

> 一切勾結帝國主義的軍閥、官僚、買辦階級、大地主階級以及附屬於他們的一部分反動知識界，是我們的敵人。工業無產階級是我們革命的領導力量。一切半無產階級、小資產階級，是我們最接近的朋友。那動搖不定的中產階級，其右翼可能是我們的敵人，其左翼可能是我們的朋友——但我們要時常提防他們，不要讓他們擾亂了我們的陣線。
>
> All imperialist warlords and officials, the comprador class, the class of large landlords as well as the reactionary intellectual circles belonging to them are our enemies. The class of the industrial proletariat is the leading force of our revolution. All those from the

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136 Liang Mingzhi 梁明致, "Duiyu jieji zhengdou zhi yige yiwen: zhi Chen Duxiu" 對於階級爭鬥之一個疑問：致陳獨秀, quoted in Jiang Lingnan's essay in this volume, p. XXX.

137 See, for example, Zhu Zhixin 1920; Hu Hanmin 1919; Cai Hesen 1921b; and, most prominently, Mao Zedong 1925.

138 "Shehui zhuyi yu Jiang Kanghu" 社會主義與江亢虎 (1923), in Li Da 2014, 77.

> semi-proletarian class and the class of the small bourgeoisie are our closest friends; and for that vacillating, indecisive class of middle bourgeoisie, their right wing might be our enemy, and their left wing might be our friend—but we have to always guard against them and not let them bring our battle alignment into disarray.[139]

7 Conclusion

Written in 1925, Mao's definition of friend and foe marked the endpoint of the discussion of "class" in China's transformative period. The Marxist concept came to dominate the next half of the century. However, its preeminence should not obscure the fact that, just like "class" itself, it cannot simply be taken for granted. The Marxist concept was a latecomer to the Chinese discourse of "class." For at least two decades, it coexisted with the broad concept of *jieji*, even with occasional references to "high," "middle," and "low society," before it gained ascendance in the mid-1920s.

The concept had come a long way: from the hierarchical order of the *simin*, in which the concept of "class" was unheard of, to the integrative concept of "high," "middle," and "low society," which aspired to an order based on equality, to a loosely defined concept of "class," which problematized various kinds of inequality, and finally to the hard-nosed materialist definition of Marxist intellectuals, which insisted on antagonism, not equality. In this discourse, historical initiative continually descended the social ladder: whereas once the elites, distinguished by prestige, dominated all of the people, soon a new "middle society," qualified by education, claimed to be the decisive integrating class, only to be deposed by the proletariat, defined by economic means, which clamored for leadership. The fourfold division of traditional society was replaced by a tripartite model with a pivotal "middle society," which in turn was reduced to the polarizing concept of two antagonistic classes. And the concept of segregated estates, in which national solidarity was inconceivable, first gave way to one of national unity and, finally, to the call for international class struggle.

The differences between the four conceptual stages of "class" with respect to (1) the number of strata they postulate, (2) their societal frame of reference, (3) the basic units of social strata, (4) their defining criteria, (5) the driving social force, (6) the relationship between strata, and (7) the role assigned to "equality" may be summarized as follows:

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139 Mao Zedong 1925.

	simin	"societies"	"class"	Marxist "class"
(1)	four	three	multiple	two
(2)	stratified	national	international	international
(3)	families	individuals	individuals	individuals[140]
(4)	prestige	education	various	economic means
(5)	elites	"middle society"	(unclear)	lower "class"
(6)	segregated	integrative	divided	antagonistic
(7)	equality repudiated	equality valorized	equality valorized	equality relegated

In descriptions of modern Chinese society, there has hardly been a more prominent concept than "class." This article discussed how contingent this concept is, and how diverse its Chinese formulations were from 1895 to 1925. It also indicated that "class" is a prime example of the fact that concepts are not only indicators, but also influential *agents* of change. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Marxist concept of "class" led precisely to the kind of violent class struggle it implied. Since, conceptually, there was an antagonistic "bourgeoisie," it had to be liquidated physically: shot, hounded to death, or deported to labor camps. Such is the imprint that one specific concept of "class" left on China's modern history. The above discussion may hint at how differently this history could have unfolded if another definition of "class" had prevailed in China's transformative period.

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140 After 1949, "class" labels—tellingly called "class origin" (*jieji chushen*)—were increasingly tied to families, not individuals; just like in the imperial order, they were inherited.

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