

Early Chen Duxiu's program for national salvation: a rough draft
Lawrence C. Chin, July 2018

**Early Chen Duxiu's
program of national salvation
(An Exegesis)**

(早期陳獨秀的救國計劃)

A rough draft

Lawrence C. Chin

Preface

Tang Baolin, in his massive biography on Chen Duxiu, summarizes at one point the viewpoint of the Chinese radicals to whom Chen Duxiu belonged in launching the New Culture Movement:

The root cause of China's weakness is that its citizens are dumb, ignorant, and backward, and this is the consequence of the poisoning effect of the Old Culture. Therefore, to save China, one must start with the New Culture Movement which is supposed to transform the Old Culture.¹

This essay is meant to clarify what exactly this statement means: why is the Old Culture poisoning?

Introduction

It is said that Chen Duxiu is a “nationalist”, a “patriot”. What does that mean? It means that he loves his nation, that he loves China. And what does that mean? It means that he wants China to be independent of foreign rule, that he wants China to rule itself. Is that all? No. In particular, he wants China to become a strong nation. Nationalism or patriotism means the pursuit of state power. What does that entail? It entails a certain collectivism. As to the question whether citizens exist for the state or whether the state exists for its citizens, early (pre-communist) Chen is decidedly on the former. After his conversion to communism, he has sometimes decided for the latter. It is no wonder that, when we examine early Chen's words, we will see much concern with how the state can best exploit its citizens. This concern, it will be argued below, constitutes early Chen's program for China's national salvation.

What we need to understand about Chen Duxiu is that he is not a systematic, or even a consistent, thinker. He is sloppy. He frequently contradicts himself, due to the fact that, when he tries to sell patriotism, he's not always being serious with what he is saying (his “sales pitch”). More importantly, Chen has only an intuitive understanding of things but doesn't discipline his own thinking enough as to

1 Tang Baolin, *Chen Duxiu quangzhuàn* (唐寶林, 陳獨秀全傳), Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2011. The original text reads: “中國衰弱的主要根源是國民愚昧落後, 而這是舊文化毒害的結果, 因此救亡應該從改造舊文化的新文化運動着手...”

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thematize what exactly he is doing.² We must therefore extract from his speech and writings what he means but never quite explicitly states. We must pay attention to the images he invokes in his speech and writings and the assumption he makes while stating his arguments. The purpose of this paper is to explicitly lay out his program for China's national salvation which he implies in all his early speech and writings but which he has never explicitly stated in the open. It is: to liberate the citizens' potentials and synergize their work, so that the state can extract the maximal amount of useful work from the greatest number of its citizens so as to build up its power. His relentless attack on Confucian order is motivated by his understanding that the old order suppresses the development of the citizens' potentials (and therefore makes the nation weak) and his revolution is about replacing the old order with a new liberal regime of equality, liberty, and solidarity under which the citizens can not only better develop their potentials but also synergize their work (so that the nation can become stronger).

National salvation as increasing "national aggregate efficiency": the example of "male feminism"

In economics, there is the concept of "aggregate energy efficiency", or the "ratio of useful to potential physical work that can be extracted from materials." If 10 percent of the raw material can be turned into useful work during the production process while the rest 90 percent is discarded as waste or lost as heat, then the "aggregate efficiency" of the economic system is 10 percent. Economic progress in this respect consists in increasing "aggregate efficiency" through technological advances.

The state's extraction of maximal work from maximal number of its citizens – liberating the citizens' potential – can be understood as increasing the "national aggregate efficiency". The so-called Chinese "male feminism" can best illustrate the concept.

(The definition of Chinese "male feminism" at the turn of the twentieth century: (1) it is men who are promoting the liberation of women; (2) this promotion of women's liberation by radical men is (more or less) chronologically prior to, and the instigator for, women activists' taking up the banner themselves; (3) radical men want the liberation of women in order to increase state power (for the purpose of national salvation). "Male feminism" is feminism as part of nationalism. The other definition of "male feminism" (men want feminism in order to be able to marry intelligent and educated women of their own choice) will be considered later.)

Chinese "male feminists" – from Kan Youwei to Chen Duxiu – can be said to have intuitively understood "aggregate efficiency" in the production of a nation's power. If a nation mobilizes only a small fraction of its citizens' productive power for the purpose of building its strength, then it has a low "aggregate efficiency". Female footbinding and the traditional (Confucian) family structure which oppressed women (made them sit at home and bear children and do nothing else) caused them to be unproductive members of society, thus lowering the nation's "aggregate efficiency" in mobilizing its citizens for the production of its strength. A new structure which would liberate women from oppression and turn them into productive members of society can increase "aggregate efficiency" and thus make the nation stronger. The essence of Chinese radicals' attitude toward women is their recognition that, in women as well as in men, there lies the potential for work and that traditional

2 This is also Lee Feigon's opinion about Chen in his *Chen Duxiu: Founder of the Chinese Communist Party* (Princeton University Press, 1983). See Preface, p. xi.

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family structure and aesthetics about women have suppressed this potential.

The proponents of the anti-footbinding movement made two arguments against the cruel custom:³ (1) footbinding makes women weaker, and weak mothers will produce weak children, resulting in a weak race. Strong mothers are needed to strengthen the racial stock as a prelude to strengthening the nation⁴. (2) A physically healthy woman can participate in the production process and productive women will double total production. For example:

From their perspective, China has 400 million people, half of them women. Because women's feet are bound, "200 million depend on others to feed them, creating a burden on the men", but if "they can move their legs freely, then the number of workers can double, the quantity of commodities produced can also double, tax revenues can also double. This is why the benefits [of not binding women's feet] is so great."⁵

In other words, the Chinese radicals, although they never quite explicitly thematize it, understand intuitively the concept of "aggregate efficiency": footbinding has decreased "aggregate efficiency" by 50 percent (in a rough, intuitive, estimate). In other words, the strength of the nation depends on how much productive power it can extract from its citizens, female as well as male. Chen Duxiu has obviously inherited the same intuitive understanding from the prevalent climate of radicalism during his formative years.

The fundamental issue which runs through the whole Chinese radicalism in early twentieth century (spoken or not) is the removal of the obstacles which have prevented the citizens from unfolding their potential or, put in another way, which have prevented the nation from extracting the maximal productive power from its citizens. These obstacles are the traditional, Confucian, hierarchical social order and cumbersome customs. The concern with liberating citizens' potential is thus the common theme which underlies all of early Chen's reform or revolutionary programs. While his "feminism", like the "feminism" of other Chinese radicals since Kan Youwei, is basically about liberating women's potential for the sake of increasing state power, his relentless attack on the traditional Confucian order is motivated by his concern with liberating all citizens' potentials, men's as well as women's, for the sake of increasing state power. Thus his attack on traditional institutions and customs oppressive to women is part of his more general attack on the whole Chinese tradition (mostly Confucianism, but also Buddhism and Daoism).⁶

Increasing national aggregate efficiency explains Chen's belief about a correlation between social justice and state power

3 According to Zhang Ming's exposition in "Nanrende buchanzu yungdong, 1895 - 1898" (張鳴, 男人的不纏足運動 1895-1898. 百年中國 二十一世紀雙月刊 1998年4月號 總第四十六期).

4 The words used are: 繁種、保種、強種, 進而強國富國.

5 The original text reads: 在他們看來, 中國當時有四萬萬人, 一半為婦女, 由於纏足之故, '二萬萬女子嗷然待哺, 重困男子', 如果 '舒其趾, 鉅其足, 則執業之人可增一倍, 土產物宜亦增一倍, 各處稅務亦增一倍, 此利益之大何如也'. The quote came from Liu Songwu (士紳劉頌虞藝公懇示禁幼女纏足稟, 湘報, 第五十三號.)

6 Christina Kelley Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution* (University of California Press, 1995).

Besides the constant admonition about increasing state power, these other themes are also constantly on Chen's mouth: (1) justice throughout society (not just justice for women); (2) social solidarity; (3) mass participation in politics, or "democracy"; (4) promoting sciences and getting rid of superstitions; (5) language reform; and (6) "progress" or the replacement of the old with the new, of the old, rotten, and oppressive Confucian structure with a new, Western, liberation regime. For Chen, all these things are different components of the same package.

The following is meant to explain why, in the mind of Chen, all these good things are interrelated and different facets of the same thing. Especially, why Chen assumes there exists a necessary correlation between state power and economic prosperity on the one hand and social justice and democracy on the other. The correlation is not as obvious as it might appear: its obviousness today is probably due to the fact that it is a typical, and somewhat proven, assumption among contemporary leftist radicals. (For example, women activists would try to sell women's empowerment to third world countries or big corporations by telling them that this will help build their economy or increase their profit margins, a conclusion supported by all UN indexes and which today has become a truism.)⁷ But where were the scientific evidences for this correlation in Chen's time? One should note how different the position of Chen was from his European counterparts. Chen's radicalism itself was more or less the same as that of his counterparts in Europe (the same cries to end exploitation, the same demands for women's equality with men, the same concern with "progress", and, in the case of Mazzini, the same dream for national independence). The principal concern of European radicalism – from the earliest Condorcet, Saint Simon, and Fourier to the later Marx and August Bebel – is also the liberation of human potentials, just as it is the case with Chen. (Indeed, "progress" is defined everywhere as greater liberation of citizens' potential. Interpreting Chen's aim as greater liberation of citizens' potential therefore has the advantage of establishing continuity between Chinese and Western radicals.) The difference is that, among European radicals, there was hardly any mention of building state power. The anarchists and socialists in Europe, when they advocated social justice or talked about liberating human potentials, never seem to have thought about whether they wanted to do so in order to increase their nations' power. Somehow, in China, the same radicalism was not practiced to promote social justice for its own sake but to build state power. Why isn't it possible to increase state power and achieve economic prosperity simply by buying arms, training soldiers, and developing heavy industry without worrying about social justice and other cultural issues? (This is indeed how the Chinese first began their reform, namely, the Self-Strengthening Movement.) South Korea, Taiwan, and China have all achieved economic prosperity and/or developed state power in later times without any fuss about social justice and democracy. What's going on in Chen's head such that he sees this necessary connection?

Chen has always been a revolutionary in the quest for state power.⁸ Although it is often said that he only turned his attention to cultural reforms after he witnessed the failure of the 1911 revolution – that the Chinese people needed to be reformed in their *Weltanschauung* as well in order to really want a republic – he had since very early on assumed a correlation to exist between state power and economic prosperity on the one hand and social justice and other cultural issues on the other. This is seen in his

7 Note also that the correlation between economy prosperity and democracy is the theme of Francis Fukuyama's famous *The End of History and the Last Man*.

8 I follow here Rebecca Karl's definition in her *Staging the World*, Duke University Press, 2002, p. 3.

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pre-1911 writings in the *Anhui Common Speech Report*.

For example, this is how he begins his admonitions about the Chinese marriage custom in his famous “On Harmful Customs”⁹ – how unreasonable it is and how unfair it is, especially to women:

Our China has so many bizarre bad customs that it is difficult to enumerate them all at once. Let me tell you about just a few of them, those *which directly concern the strength and weakness of our nation*.¹⁰

Only then does he begin to ramble on about how unreasonable and unfair the marriage custom is¹¹ – except that he is then denouncing its unreasonableness and injustice for reasonableness’ and justice’s own sake, without mentioning again the problem regarding the relative strength of the nation. He begins with one concern and ends with another, not simply because he is a sloppy thinker, but also because he has taken for granted the fact that what is unreasonable and unfair necessarily leads to a weak nation.

His admonitions are basically three (before marriage, during marriage, and after marriage): (1) Chinese marriage custom is unreasonable and unfair because the couple is forced by their parents to marry rather than because they love each other. The man is often forced to marry a bad wife, and the woman a bad husband. The woman is especially disadvantaged by such custom because she is reduced to a piece of instrument to bear male offspring. (2) The families of the marrying couple put up too much fuss about ceremonial aspects of the marriage that are irrelevant from the perspective of the couple who just want to be together. The families refuse to leave the couple in peace. The woman is especially physically handicapped by the ceremonies, such as being cramped into a small carrier and stifled by the accessories.¹² (3) The marriage custom is unreasonable and unfair because it doesn’t permit divorce, but is especially disadvantaging to women since a man, when a widower, is permitted to remarry but a woman, when a widow, is expected to remain chaste to her dead husband. (The typical complaint among Chinese male feminists about the double standard of sexual mores.) Note that Chen repeatedly presupposes, takes for granted, women’s equality with men – the marriage custom is unreasonable and unfair *because* men and women are supposed to be equal¹³ – even though it is supposed to be his task to prove precisely this. This illustrates how sloppy his thinking is. He is not trying to prove anything with argument, but merely expressing a program of national salvation which he already has in mind.

9 All of Chen Duxiu’s writings and speeches cited below come from *Chen Duxiu Xuanzi* (陳獨秀選集), vol. 1 – 3 (天津人民出版社, 1990 – 1996).

10 “Esu pian” 惡俗篇 (“On Harmful Customs”), *Xuanji*, 1, p. 39, emphasis added. The original text reads: 我們中國希奇古怪的壞風俗，實在是多的很，一時也說不盡，現在我挑那頂要緊的，頂有關係國家強弱的，說幾件給列位聽聽。

11 Chen’s original phrase is: 不合情理。

12 Ibid, p. 42.

13 Speaking of the harassment by family members which the newly weds are expected to endure, Chen writes: “When it comes to all human beings in this world, men and women have equal rights without any difference...” (況且世界上人，男女平權，毫無差別)。Ibid., p. 43. Then, speaking of the double standard whereby the woman is not allowed to divorce, Chen writes: “Heaven gives birth to men and women in the same way (天生男女都是一樣); why is it that the man can reject the woman, but that the woman cannot reject the man?” Ibid., p. 45.

It will take some brain work on the reader's part to understand why, when marriage custom is unreasonable and unfair, the nation is weakened. Chen himself says that, when husband and wife love each other rather than being forced to tolerate each other, "happiness of the human race is increased" and "the nation is at peace".¹⁴ Here he is merely trying to sell "free marriage": a "sales pitch" that should not be taken seriously. Chen's real intention must be that of a typical Chinese male feminist: young people are *restrained* by all these cumbersome customs from expressing their potential, the woman is even physically *restricted* from moving about, so that men and women of the new generation cannot be expected to contribute much talent and work to their nation. The marriage custom is "unreasonable" because, of course, a nation is supposed to have customs that facilitate its citizens' contribution to it rather than hampering it.

I thus argue here that Chen perceives the correlation in question through the concept of liberating citizens' potential and maximizing the state's ability to extract work from them – namely, because he has intuitively understood "national aggregate efficiency". The concern with liberating citizens' potentials and increasing state's power underlies all the other themes that are constantly on Chen's mouth. For Chen, social justice is principally a means to an end. Its purpose is to liberate the citizens' potential so that they can contribute more work to the state to increase its power. *Social justice is the means to increasing "national aggregate efficiency"*. Citizens unfold their potentials better *and* in the greatest number when they operate under "democracy" where they have liberty, are free from unreasonable constraints, and are equal to each other (where no one is the slave of another). Moreover, when they have a right to participate in the power structure, they can not only express their potential better but also develop a sense of responsibility for the greater whole. This will help create synergy among all the contributing citizens. Such is basically Chen's whole program.¹⁵

Chen's program for China's salvation is basically the same phrase which summarizes the French Revolution: "liberty", "equality", and "fraternity". As he states in "New Youth Manifesto":

The new society of the new era, according to our ideal, is sincere, progressive, activist, *free, egalitarian*, creative, beautiful, *kind*, peaceful, *mutual assistance, laboring* and pleasant, and happiness for the whole society, and we hope the current phenomena – hypocritical, conservative, *passive, constraining*, class-divided, conventional, ugly, vicious, belligerent, disorderly, *lazy, stifling*, and happiness for a few – will gradually decrease and become extinct.¹⁶

Chen frequently invokes the image of passivity, constraining, restricting, laziness, lifelessness, not laboring and not moving about when he talks about the traditional Confucian order – such as he does here – because his basic concern is with *removing constraints on the greatest number* so that the

14 Ibid., p. 45.

15 Chen's definition of "democracy" follows John Dewey's. See his "The Foundation for Establishing Democracy" (實行民治的基礎), *Xuanji*, vol. 2, p. 28.

16 新青年宣言, *Xuanji*, vol. 2, p. 40. The original text reads: 我們理想的新時代新社會, 是誠實的, 進步的, 積極的, 自由的, 平等的, 創造的, 美的, 善的, 和平的, 相愛互助的, 勞動而愉快的, 全社會幸福的. 希望那虛偽的, 保守的, 消滅的, 束縛的, 階級的, 因義的, 醜的, 惡的, 戰爭的, 寡陋不安的, 懶墮而煩悶的, 少數幸福的現象, 漸漸減少, 至於消滅.

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greatest number can best develop, and contribute, their potential. It is a question about increasing “national aggregate efficiency” just as is the case among male feminists. “Equality” means *everybody* is liberated to develop his or her potential, not simply a few. The greatest evil of a hierarchical “master-slave” society is the restrictions it places upon the masses to prevent them from moving about and developing themselves. “Equality” and “democracy” thus mean not only that each individual can better develop his or her potential but also that the potentials of the greatest number of citizens can be liberated – only then will the nation have maximally mobilized its citizens or achieved the greatest possible “aggregate efficiency”. Only then will a nation become strong, powerful, and prosperous.

Once everyone is given the chance (by the new regime) to express his or her potential, this is at once a more just society (*more beautiful*). Social justice is both the cause and the consequence of liberating everyone's potential to the maximum. When women's dignity is respected¹⁷, this means giving them an environment in which they are permitted to physically move about and express their full potential. The state will then become stronger, and society more prosperous and just at the same time (*happiness for all*). Again, Chen's feminism is simply part of his larger program for liberating *everyone's* potential, the poor's as well as the rich's, women's as well as men's.

Giving everyone a chance to participate in the political system of the land is also part and parcel of the devise to allow everyone to develop his or her full potential. Hence we see how the state's need to increase “aggregate efficiency” in the pursuit of greater power leads at once to women's rights, social justice, and democracy. This is how, in Chen's mind, all the “good things” are inherently connected with one another: it's all about liberating the potentials of the maximum number of people to the maximum degree.

This is not all. When citizens are allowed to develop their potentials, are happier, and have a sense of responsibility for the whole society, they also develop solidarity with one another. Solidarity is of utmost importance when it comes to increasing the power of the state. When citizens work together instead of being divided against each other, the state can mobilize a greater amount of work from its citizens: synergy. The state increases its “aggregate efficiency” not only when it extracts more work from more of its citizens, but also when the works which its citizens contribute go in the same direction rather than going in opposite directions and canceling each other out.

When everyone is permitted to express his or her potential to the fullest, there will be a society that is less hierarchical and more egalitarian. The immorality which Chen constantly criticizes of his fellow Chinese people (hypocrisy, flattery, dishonesty, concern only with oneself) is the complement of a hierarchical and oppressive society. (The traditional Chinese society is *ugly*.) When everyone is equal to each other and fully allowed to express himself or herself, people will naturally want to love and help each other instead of guarding against and antagonizing each other. Solidarity is the complement of an egalitarian society.

To summarize: “liberty” means “letting each individual develop and contribute”; “equality” means “letting the greatest number develop and contribute”; and “fraternity” (“solidarity”) means “synergy

17 That is: 人格.

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among the greatest number". These are the thoughts which must have run through Chen's mind but which he is too confused to express explicitly when he demands freedom, equality, democracy, reasonableness, mutual assistance, and happiness for all.

When a more efficient system replaces a less efficient system, it's "progress"

What Chen means by "justice throughout society" is precisely the replacement of the old oppressive structure with a new structure of liberty and equality for all under which every citizen can unfold his or her potential unhindered. Chen constantly invokes the image of replacing the corrupt and dying old (Confucian) society with a new, more energetic, (Westernized) society because he has intuitively recognized (a) the sociological fact that each type of social structure is at bottom a particular manner of mobilizing the work of citizens for the functioning of the whole and (b) the evolutionary fact that the older social structure is less capable of mobilizing the work of citizens (has lower "aggregate efficiency") because it is less experienced in the matter but that, as human beings learn to do things better, the newer structure is more capable of mobilizing the work of citizens (has greater "aggregate efficiency"). His relentless praises for things "Western" are motivated simply by his understanding that Western society represents a newer stage of development where it has learned to better mobilize the work of citizens. Since human beings learn to do things better over time, there emerges the historical pattern of the older, less efficient structure being replaced by the newer, more efficient structure, often through "revolutions".

Thus comes about Chen's preoccupation with "progress". When the state increases its "aggregate efficiency", it is doing better, has learned to do better, hence it is "progress". Since history is about the replacement of the worse, inefficient system by a better, more efficient system, such replacement, when it occurs, denotes "progress": human society is "doing better", is "improving" itself, has increased its "aggregate efficiency".

In many places of his speech and writings Chen expresses his concern with "replacing the old with the new", "replacing the worse with the better", with "progress". In one place, Chen refers to his life-long wish as "renewing China", i.e. creating a new China to replace the old China¹⁸. In another place, in the same "New Youth Manifesto", he announces first of all:

We believe that, among the nations of the world, there are many old concepts subsisting in politics, morals, and economics which are unreasonable and *prevent progress*. We want society to evolve....¹⁹

Then, speaking of women's equality with men:

We believe respecting women's dignity and rights is necessary for the *progress of social life*...²⁰

18 "吾国革新的希望", in "Xin Qingnian zuianzhi dabianshu" (新青年罪案之答辩书), *Xuanji*, vol. 1, p. 422.

19 Xin Qingnian Xuanyan, *Xuanji*, vol. 2, p. 40, emphasis added. The original text reads: 我們相信世界各國政治上, 道德上, 經濟上因舊的舊觀念中, 有許多阻礙進化而且不合情理的部分. 我們想求社會進化...

20 Ibid., p. 41, emphasis added. The original text reads: 我們相信尊重女子的人格和權利, 已經是現在社會生活進步

His most explicit expression on this manner is certainly his famous statement on the meaning of “revolution” in “On the Literary Revolution”:

Whence came the greatness of Europe? It's the gift of revolution. What is meant by “revolution” in European languages is *altering the old* and *changing to the new*, this is completely different from the change of dynasty in Chinese conception. Since Renaissance, there has been revolution in politics, in religion, in ethics and morals, in literature and art. Everything is *renewed* and *evolves* through revolution. The history of modern European civilization is the history of revolutions. Hence it is said: the greatness of Europe today is the gift of revolution.²¹

In fact, Chen, like many of his radical colleagues, has implicitly accepted the evolutionist view of history common in Europe as truism. In “Old Thinking and the Problem Concerning the Type of Regime”, a speech he gave in early 1917, he begins thusly:

Just a while ago, Mr Li Shizhen said in his speech ‘The Evolution of Academics’: ‘That politics evolves from kingship to democracy, this is an inevitable trend, I can be optimistic about it.’ I believe Mr Li's theoretical statement is certainly correct...²²

Although Chen never states explicitly what distinguishes the new from the old, democracy from kingship – he is being sloppy – it is clear from the foregoing that it is the *greater liberation of citizens' potential* – exactly what “progress” means among European radicals.

Chen's thinking is that to each social structure corresponds a whole set of cultural and social phenomena which a less discerning mind will assume to be independent of each other: language, marriage customs, school system, *everything*. In fact, all these things form together a whole “system” – the social structure in question. Thus, he complains:

“The reason why I have such opinion, it is not to intentionally disagree with others, nor because I am biased toward the imperial system and won't part with it, nor because China is more suitable to the imperial system but not to the republican system; it is because our Chinese people, although on their mouth they are not against republicanism, are in their mind stuck with old thinking from the imperial age... If we want to consolidate republicanism, we must completely eradicate all the anti-republican thinking that fills our citizens' head, *because the state organization and social order and ethical concepts that are proper to a democratic republic are the complete inverse of the state organization and social order and ethical concepts of an autocratic imperial system, one's emphasis is on the spirit of equality, the other's is*

的實際需要...

21 文學革命論, *Xuanji*, vol. 1, p. 260. The italicized phrases are: “革故更新” and “莫不因革命而新興而進化”.

22 舊思想與國體問題, *ibid.*, p. 295. The original text reads: 方才李石曾先生演說 ‘學術之進化’ 有云, ‘政治進化的潮流, 由君主而民主, 乃一定趨勢, 吾人可以懷抱樂觀.’ 鄙人以為李先生的理論, 固然不錯 ...

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on hierarchical class structure, these two sides cannot be reconciled with each other...²³

Thus, in order to increase the state's "aggregate efficiency", it's not simply the old political structure (the imperial and feudal system) which needs to be dismantled, but also everything else which has grown around this political structure: language, marriage customs, religions, ethics, superstitions. In order for the state to better mobilize its citizens, the Chinese language must be romanized, the arranged marriage system dismantled, religions discredited (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism), ethical concepts changed, and superstitions eradicated.

Another example. In "The Criminal Case of New Youth Magazine", Chen refers to the accusations which opponents of the magazine have leveled against it, that this magazine:

"... destroys the Confucian religion, rites and customs, the national essence, the rules of chastity, the old ethics (loyalty and filial piety), the traditional art (Chinese opera), the old religions (the worship of gods and ghosts), the old literature, and the old politics (rules by the privileged)..."²⁴

And he replies by first admitting to his "crimes" but then explaining:

"When I seek the reason for it all, I see that I'm originally guiltless. It's all because I promote and protect 'Mr Democracy' and 'Mr Science' that I have committed these terrifying crimes. In order to promote and protect 'Mr Democracy', I have had to oppose the Confucian religion, rites and customs, rules of chastity, old ethics, and old politics. In order to promote and protect 'Mr Science', I have had to oppose traditional art and old religions. In order to promote and protect both 'Mr Democracy' and 'Mr Science', I have had to oppose national essence and traditional literature. You think about it: other than promoting and protecting 'Mr Democracy' and 'Mr Science', has our magazine ever committed other crimes?"²⁵

That is, Chen has never intended to oppose old rites and customs and the traditional Chinese culture in general for their own sake but has only unintentionally harmed them because he is in a race to promote democracy and science. Why is this? Because *with any political regime is associated a particular system of religions, rites, customs, and ethics that is proper to it and to none other*. When the emperor is replaced with democracy, it is simply impossible to preserve the rest of the Chinese tradition.

The Confucian family as the source of all evil

For Chen, the old structure's greatest fault lies in the fact that, here, the family occupies the center point

23 Ibid., p. 295 - 296, emphasis added. The original text reads: 因為民主共和的國家組織社會制度倫理觀念, 和君主專制的國家組織社會制度倫理觀念全然相反, 一個是重在平等精神, 一個是重在尊卑階級, 萬萬不能調和的...

24 Ibid., p. 442. The original text reads: "... 破壞孔教, 禮法, 國粹, 貞節, 舊倫理 (忠孝節), 舊藝術 (中國戲), 舊宗教 (鬼神), 舊文學, 舊政治 (特權人治) ..."

25 Ibid.

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of society. Because of this, Chinese people have no notion of the nation and care only about contributing their work to their family and not to their nation. They don't much care if their country has become extinct and they have become foreigners' slaves. Attached to their family rather than to each other and the whole nation, they have no ability to band together and organize themselves. The traditional Confucian family is responsible for lowering the "national aggregate efficiency".

Throughout his speech and writings, Chen continually laments over Chinese people's lack of national consciousness and, in consequence, lack of ability to care about each other and organize themselves. He starts from his own case, for example in June 1904 in a short essay "Concerning the Nation":

More than 10 years ago, when I was still studying at home, everyday I knew only about eating and sleeping. When I decided to get serious and do great things, it merely meant studying hard as a way to succeed in exams and obtain government posts and reputations, in the process glorifying my family. I didn't know what 'nation' is and how it is relevant to me. Only until Jiawu did I ever hear of a nation called 'Japan' which had beaten our China. Only until Genzi did I ever hear how eight nations – England, Russia, France, Germany, Italy, America, Austria, and Japan – had together beaten our China. That's when I realized that the peoples in the world were divided into nations... That our China is one nation among many, and that I'm a member of the Chinese nation. When a nation is strong or insulted, all its people suffer the same fate, how can I, as one person, escape this fate?... Before I only thought about my own happiness and glorifying my own family. As for the nation, that was irrelevant for me...²⁶

In "The Reasons for the Nation's Extinction", Chen lists two corrupt qualities of the Chinese people as the reasons in question: (1) that they care only about their family but not about their nation; and (2) that they believe everything is determined by fate and so are not motivated to actively effect change to make things better. He summarizes the first reason:

The first reason, knowing only there is the family and not knowing there is also a nation. Our China must have had the most developed family regime. Thus Chinese people place the greatest emphasis on the family... The life-long wish of every Chinese is nothing other than establishing one's own family and obtaining one's own career, finding a wife, giving birth to a son, becoming rich and obtaining an official post. Getting a post with the government might originally have been part of the business of managing one's nation, but, when it comes to Chinese government officials, their purpose is merely to make money so as to return home to live rich and comfortable. As for the question how one's own nation can become strong and prosperous, how it can become stronger than other nations in the world, how officials can eliminate harms for the citizens, how to generate wealth for the nation – they don't think about these even in their dreams. All that they ever plan to do, is returning home with money to buy lands and build houses, getting a wife to produce a son,

26 說國家, *ibid.*, p. 55.

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tutoring the son so he can become rich too, marrying daughters to rich families – all these are for the family only, it's not part of the business of working in officialdom to pay back to one's nation. The other peasants and businessmen and workers, they all care only about keeping their own families... If you talk to them about nation's business, they will tell you there are the emperor and his officialdom who will take care of it and it has nothing to do with little citizens like themselves. The richer a family, the more it cares only about protecting its own property, the more it has no care for the nation's business.²⁷

When the citizens don't care about contributing to their nation because they have no notion of it, the nation is due to become extinct. For the same reason, while announcing his determination to respect women's dignity and rights, Chen also reminds women to remember their responsibility for society at large:

“We also hope every woman will become thoroughly conscious of her responsibility for society”²⁸

National consciousness – “citizens exist for the state” – is the other side of the coin “solidarity”. Lacking national consciousness means that Chinese people each live in their own little hole and don't know how to work together, resulting in the state's inability to extract synergy from them. For example, Chen laments in April 1920 in “What is New Culture Movement”:

The American ambassador said Chinese people don't have organizational capacity, but I think it is because [Chinese people] lack notion of public good that they have missed out on organizational capacity. Jealousy and the desire to possess for oneself is common among all mankind, and we don't expect Westerners to be better than the Chinese in this respect. But because Westerners are deterred by the awareness of public good which maintains group solidarity, they have the ability to organize themselves, unlike the Chinese people who are always loosely scattered. Chinese people lack awareness of public good, they act entirely out of selfish interests, so that, throughout politics, business, manufacturing, and academia, there is conflict whenever there are more than ten people involved, and there is never any organization that doesn't disintegrate within three to five years.²⁹

In consequence: (1) Chinese people do not have any interest in contributing work to his nation, and (2) there is no societal synergy; the result is that the state cannot extract the maximal amount of work from the maximal number of its citizens and that “national aggregate efficiency” remains low. Fraternity, solidarity, national consciousness, and “civic responsibility” all hang together.

Chen is thus a tactician of “reason of the State”, an engineer of “nation-state”. Throughout his writings,

27 亡國的原因, *ibid.*, p. 81.

28 Xin Qingnian Xuanyan, *Xuanji*, vol. 2, p. 41. The original text reads: 並且希望他們個人自己對於社會責任有徹底的覺悟.

29 新文化運動是什麼, *Xuanji*, vol. 2, p. 127. “Notion of public good” translates 公共心.

Chen quite understands, although he never states explicitly, that the nation-state structure achieves greater “aggregate efficiency” by establishing *direct* relationship with each citizen without the family institution standing in the way. Being conscious of oneself as a citizen of a nation rather than as simply a member of one's family – consciousness of one's nationality – means establishing for oneself a direct relationship with one's nation. This is why Chen is so critical of the Confucian family structure. As noted, he considers the family to be the reason why Chinese people have no national consciousness and thus have no notion of contributing their work to the state to increase its power: the Confucian society encourages people to care about and live for their family only. When Chen denounces the family as the cause for Chinese people's lack of organizational capacity, he is pointing out the greatest obstacle to the state's ability to synergize the work which it extracts from its citizens.

Other aspects of cultural reform

The other aspects of Chen's cultural reform all revolve around the theme of liberating citizens' potential and synergizing it as a way to increase state power. Sciences give citizens greater power over nature while superstitions are a waste of their time, energy, and resources.³⁰ Again, efficiency vs inefficiency. The Chinese language needs to be romanized not only because old writings are packed with outdated feudalistic concepts and superstitions,³¹ but also because the Chinese character system is too complex, costs too much time to learn, and therefore hinders the citizens' effort to use language to express themselves and learn new ideas. Furthermore, vernacular writing needs to replace the literary style so that the masses, instead of a select few, can also read and write. The maximal number of people can then contribute their work to the state when reading and writing are required for such contribution. In the mind of Chen and his fellow Chinese radicals, language has also to be “efficient”. There is then also the need for a national vernacular to supersede the regional dialects in order for citizens from different parts of the nation to be able to communicate with each other.³² The purpose again is to facilitate synergy, to increase their organizational capacity, to increase their attachment to each other rather than simply to their families and local folks.

30 Thus, in “Worshipping Bodhisattva” (敬菩薩), *Xuanji*, vol. 1, p. 46, Chen laments: “When we live in this world, it's hard enough to make money. When we make a little money, other than spending it on clothing and food, we use it to pay taxes and educate our young, all this makes sense. But our Chinese people, whether rich or poor, old or young, must waste money on things that have no benefits, it's like throwing money into the water without even an echo. You ask, What is this thing without benefit? That's worshipping Bodhisattva.” Chen then gives a detail description of how Chinese people spend money on burning incense and making sacrifices to wooden idols believing the gods will then spare them plagues and fires. Chen admonishes that *plague results from eating unclean food and fire from dry weather and accidents* (ibid., p. 47). In the end, Chen explains *how the whole matter relates to the nation's relative strengthen and weakness*: “Our Chinese people love to worship Bodhisattva, and yet Bodhisattva doesn't protect us. Chinese people remain unfortunate, their nation weak, letting Westerners bully them. Westerners don't worship Bodhisattva, they don't burn incense and don't make sacrifices to gods, and yet they end up having a strong and prosperous nation and being able to bully those who worship Bodhisattva” (ibid., p. 49). Chen concludes it's better to spend the resources on education, industry, and mining, namely on things that can actually benefit the nation (ibid.).

31 “Reply to Qian Xuanton” (回答錢玄同), ibid., p. 376.

32 All this is mentioned or implied in “National Vernacular Education”, *Xuanji*, vol. 1, p. 53. Note that Chen states explicitly: “Our nation is huge; and if one people from one region speak one regional dialect, when peoples of the same nation [but from different regions] meet, they can't understand each other, as if they were meeting foreigners. How can there then be any notion of national solidarity?” The original text reads: 那裡還有同國親愛的意思呢?

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As has been seen, Chen at times explicitly states that his ultimate goal is to increase state power. (This is what he means also when he states that his goal is “saving the Chinese nation”).³³ But, again, he never quite explicitly states the exact mechanism which explains why promoting women's rights or the equality of citizens or romanizing the Chinese language or creating a national vernacular will contribute to state power: liberating more work from the citizens and synergizing it. This is probably because he himself has only an intuitive notion of the matter rather than any theoretical understanding.

A “demographer” of modern nation-state behind apparent moralism

Chen is a demographer of a strong, modern nation-state. Namely, he deals with the population component of the project to build a stronger nation, a modern nation-state. He expresses his conviction in December, 1904, thusly: the reason why China is becoming extinct is not that the emperor is bad, nor that the bureaucrats are bad, nor that the army is not strong, nor that the nation has no money, nor that other countries are bullying China, nor that the bandits are rebelling, but that the quality of the citizens is becoming corrupt.³⁴ Here he contradicts himself, for his complaints about how Western imperial powers and Japan are bullying China run through his speech and writing. But he is trying to sell his brand of nationalism: To build a power nation, one needs not just the material capital (e.g. heavy industry) but also the human capital (a population capable of contributing a greater amount of work in a more synergized fashion). Chen is claiming expertise in the latter.

Even if the oppressive structure which has prevented citizens from developing their potential and synergizing their work is removed, if the quality of the people is bad, the state still couldn't mobilize them for any good purpose (couldn't extract useful work from them to build up its power). The quality of the citizens must be improved while the oppressive structure is being removed. In reality, of course, Chen doesn't distinguish between the two. As seen, he seems to believe that the corrupt quality of the citizens is the consequence of the oppressive, hierarchical structure. Once a new structure is erected to liberate the citizens' potentials and synergize their works, their quality will necessarily improve.

When the state needs to mobilize its citizens to build up its power, it's this moral being with a sense of responsibility for the greater whole who can contribute maximal and synergized work. Only then is “national aggregate efficiency” increased.

Again, Chen's identification of moral corruption with oppressive structure and moral qualities with liberating structure is not necessarily obvious. One often levels the same criticism against contemporary Asian societies which are free and prosperous: under this economic prosperity, people have become materialistic, instrumental and judgmental towards others, and care only about themselves. Feigon notes that it's precisely the realization that capitalist prosperity doesn't necessarily lead to moral citizens that Chen, after the May Fourth movement, turns to communism.³⁵ Experience has also proved that it is by no means necessary to eliminate the complicated Chinese writing system in order for the state to develop: Taiwan and Hong Kong have both become modern economies without

33 For example, he states that the purpose of the May Fourth Movement is to “love one's nation” and “save one's nation”: 愛國救國. In “What is the Spirit of May Fourth Movement?” (五四運動的精神是什麼), *Xuangji*, vol. 2, p. 130.

34 亡國的原因, *Xuanji*, vol. 1, p. 80.

35 Feigon, *ibid.*, p. 140 – 147.

any reform of the writing system. Chen's intuition about the correlation between state power and prosperity on the one hand and cultural phenomena on the other is not always correct.

Personal reasons

In this section I shall consider other reasons why Chen might possibly want to promote social justice – other reasons than increasing the “national aggregate efficiency”.

Many commentators explain why so many Chinese men were so eager to promote women's rights in early twentieth century by appealing to the benefits they might personally get from it. It also can't be denied that many of them, like Chen himself, might also have been motivated by their inborn sense of justice and sympathy for the oppressed, independently of any calculation about personal benefits and saving the nation.

One can say that personal benefits are the original motivator for patriotism (in the sense of concern to increase the state's power). Chen repeatedly emphasizes that, when the nation is extinct, the family would not be there either;³⁶ that when the nation is weaker, citizens are raped and slaughtered by foreign soldiers.³⁷ Like contemporary women activists, he tried to sell patriotism to his fellow citizens who were characteristically indifferent to the fate of their nation by reminding them how nation's life and death would affect their personal life. Nevertheless, it is true that it's through his personal experience of being looked down upon and victimized by foreigners that he realizes the importance of saving his nation to his own happiness.³⁸

It has also been said that many Chinese men are stirred to oppose the desperate and oppressive condition under which their fellow female citizens live when foreigners laugh at them on account of their degrading treatment of their women.³⁹ It's the same thing when Chen complains that Chinese people don't care when foreigners look down on them for being weak and unpatriotic.⁴⁰ Certainly, a

36 And so Chen continues from the first reason he has given for his nation's extinction: “Everyone! Everyone! You should know that the extinction of the nation and the disintegration of the family – these words are linked together: if the nation is in great disorder, how can you keep your own family?” 亡國的原因, *ibid.*, p. 81. Chen's original phrase is: 國亡家破四字相連.

37 瓜分中國, *Xuanji*, vol. 1, p. 28 – 29: “Currently nobody does anything that might benefit the nation, everyone knows only how to hide in one's home to live comfortably. Do you know that, when British soldiers come to Yangtze and take down the city, you will not be able to live comfortably? It's not just the poor who will not have anything to eat, but also the rich and businessmen who will suffer – national extinction and broken homes: these four words are linked together... As for womenfolk, they will be raped by foreign soldiers...”

38 C.f. Chen's comments about himself in “Concerning the Nation” cited earlier.

39 For example, Rebecca Karl et al (p. 6), “These progressive thinkers – and educated Asian men in general – were confronted on the one hand with the assault on their self-image as men by the hypermasculinity of the military powers of Western colonialism and imperialism; on the other hand, they were bombarded with accusations of their enslavement of women – footbinding, concubinage, and sati being cited as chief examples – which became one important moral justification for the imperialist assault on societies classified as 'barbarous' and 'half-civilized'.”

40 Chen complains: “The character of the Chinese people is that they care only about being alive but don't care about honor, so that, when they are able to merely survive in this world, they don't mind that their country is extinct and they have become slaves. The character of Westerners is such that they care only about honor but don't care about merely surviving, so that they would rather die as citizens of their nation than stay alive as slaves.” “Speech at Anhui Patriotic

significant motivator in Chinese radicalism is what Axel Honneth has called “the struggle for recognition”. Being recognized and respected by fellow human beings is a desire inherent in human nature.

In many places Chen has demonstrated that he has a strong sense of justice and enormous sympathy for people who are oppressed.⁴¹ That is to say, even if the nation's survival is not at stake, he might nonetheless advocate women's liberation for its own sake, like many of the Chinese philosophers before him such as Li Ruzhen. In the present context, however, where the nation's survival is at stake, Chen derives the urgency for women's liberation, and the liberation of the Chinese people in general, less from his personal emotions and more from his concern with increasing state power.

This issue is the most important: It is often noted that Chinese radical men promote feminism for the personal reason that, instead of being married to illiterate dumb women through their parents' arrangement, they want to marry women of their own choice, women who are educated and can share their goals and interests. That is, feminism means “personal happiness” for Chen and other Chinese radical men. This is however only part of the larger story about feminism's connection with nationalism (women's liberation for the sake of increasing state power). The frequent identification of personal liberation with national salvation among Chen's fellow radicals is proof that the liberation of the self from oppressive traditions is not simply a matter of personal convenience. (Like the motto invented by American Radical Feminists from late 1960s: “The personal is political”.) When Chen, or any of the new generation of radicals, escapes from arranged marriage, he is not simply doing so to please himself – although he *is* pleasing himself – but also as part of the greater project to liberate all citizens from oppressive structure so that they can unfold their potential unhindered and contribute to the growth of the power of the state. The purpose of the “free-love movement” – that individuals have an inalienable right to decide on what they shall do without obstruction from third party – is simply the same “liberation of the citizens' potentials” and “increasing national aggregate efficiency”.⁴²

Conclusion: power rather than liberty and justice

In the end I would like to mention two postmodern French philosophers who have critically examined the operation of power and revolutions and any other sort of resistance movements against power structures. Bertrand de Jouvenel has once written a book on power arguing that the purpose of revolutions (English, French, and Russian) is really to erect a strong government to replace the original

Society”, *ibid.*, p. 14 - 15.

41 In the manifesto for *Meizhou Pinglun (Weekly Critique)*, Chen asks: “Do you all know what is *gongli*, and what is *qiangquan*? To summarize, whatever fits with equality and liberty is *gongli*; whoever relies on his own superior strength to violate other people's equality and liberty is *qiangquan*...” 每周评论发刊词, *Xuanji*, vol. 1, p. 427. Chen's original phrase is 公理強權. See also Chen's comments about “oppression” in “What the Proper Human Life Consists In” (如何才是正當的人生), *Xuanji*, vol. 2, p. 265 – 256: “Our Chinese lives have not been proper since ancient time; it's always either this [group] which oppresses that [group], or that [group] which oppresses this [group]....” Finally, in “The Woman Question and Socialism” (婦女問題與社會主義), Chen states explicitly, “What we mean by ethics today consist of two kinds of concept: one is helping the weak to resist the strong, the other is sacrificing the weak to help the strong”, *ibid.*, p. 267. Chen of course opts for the former.

42 This is largely in agreement with Haiyan Lee's characterization of the “free love movement” in *Revolution of the Heart* (Stanford University Press, 2007), Ch. 3, The Age of Romance.

weak government rather than to promote liberty or social justice.⁴³ People engage themselves in revolutions because they have an instinctive hatred toward weak authorities rather than because they love liberty or justice. This is supposed to explain why, despite all the rhetoric about citizens' rights and liberty, revolutions often resulted in a government even more tyrannical than the preceding one. Then there is Michel Foucault who has once demonstrated that any power structure has the tendency to generate resistance against itself for the purpose of reinforcing itself.⁴⁴ Resistance movement against a power structure is often merely reinforcement, in disguise, of the power structure in question. These French critics have taught us to cast a critical view on revolutionists and social justice activists and realize that revolution against tyranny or social justice movement against oppression are often nation-building and capitalist development in disguise. Namely, the revolutionists or social justice activists are quite often deluded and deceived by their own rhetoric. They try to build up the power structure while erroneously believing they are dismantling it.

While this is the case in the West, this is not so in China or other nations which tried to modernize during the twentieth century to withstand Western imperialism. When Chen Duxiu promotes social justice or complains about society's unfair treatment of women, he is conscious that his ultimate objective is to build up the power of the very entity which has perpetrated the social injustice in question in the first place. He is quite aware of the fact that the state has weakened itself by oppressing its own citizens or that society has wakened itself by constraining the movement of its female constituents. What is so striking throughout Chen's pronouncements is not his hatred for injustice but his tremendous contempt for weakness. Just like Jouvenel's revolutionaries, he hates the Manchu officialdom not because they are tyrants but because they are weak.⁴⁵ He believes that the weakness of the Chinese state (its lower "aggregate efficiency") is manifested in the physical weakness of its citizens and their lack of any sense of morals and responsibility. He despises Chinese customs because they have made Chinese people weak and slavish.⁴⁶ It's certainly for this reason that bodily exercises plays a prominent role equal to learning and thinking in his Anhui Patriotic Society.⁴⁷

I offer this analysis of Chen Duxiu as an instructive lesson to help better understand the true nature of radicalism in its original Western context. Since Enlightenment, Western societies have gone through a series of revolutions and radicalism as a way to liberate the potential for work among the masses, disadvantaged minorities, and women and to thereby increase "national aggregate efficiency". (Liberating women's potential continues to be on the mouth of feminists even in contemporary times, from Betty Friedan to the latest "Me-Too" movement.) Through the cunning of Reason, the radicals are led to believe that their purpose is to fight tyranny and oppression rather than to build up a government more stable than a tyrant, a nation-state stronger than the tyrant's empire, and an economic structure

43 *Du pouvoir: Histoire naturelle de sa croissance*, Hachette, 2006.

44 *Histoire de la sexualité, 1 : La volonté de savoir*, Gallimard, 1984.

45 This is one example of the kind of image Chen loves to evoke to portray Manchu officials: "Do you know that Chinese officials, when they see the Russians, are like mouse seeing a cat. When they witness the Russians taking Fengtian, they don't dare utter 'No'. Other nations, when they witness how easy it is to bully China, all say China will not last." 瓜分中國, *Xuanji*, vol. 1, p. 27.

46 In his "Speech at Anhui Patriotic Society", Chen angrily states that, besides lacking patriotic sentiments, the Chinese people are all weak and deficient in liveliness. *Xuanji*, *ibid.*, p. 15. His original words are: 我全國之人皆奄奄無生氣. Again, his contempt for physical weakness.

47 Feigon, *ibid.*, p. 41.

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more dynamic and efficient than the exploiting capitalist system of the nineteenth century. Chen Duxiu is an exact replica of European radicalism operating in the Chinese environment. Yet, despite his sloppy thinking, he is not so deceived by the cunning of Reason as to forget for which original purpose it is that he wants to liberate the masses' and women's potential for work. This is certainly because China was facing extinction in Chen's time while France, Britain, Germany, and America were not.