

# The Modern Subject with Chinese Characteristics: The Chinese Assimilation of “Social Class”

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## 요약

Based on a historical examination of the intellectual and popular discourses on social class in early twentieth century China and also a trans-regional survey of the Korean and Japanese usages of the Chinese-character word, this paper explores the sociopolitical context and characteristics of Chinese appropriation of “social class” (*jieji*). This study focuses on the early period of its appropriation, that is, from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century before 1949. This article examines representative writings on social class by Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, Sun Yat-sen, Cheng Fangwu, Guo Moruo and Mao Zedong. By illuminating their different approaches to the concept, it tries to present a dynamic understanding of the class discourses in modern China and to answer the question of how the class discourse contributed to the particular way of constructing the modern subject in China. At the turn of the twentieth century, the ancient political ideal of “great harmony” (*Datong*) was replaced by “competition”

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and “survival” of the social evolution theory and then yielded to “contradiction” and “struggle” of the Marxist class theory. The modern Chinese discourses of social class were never detached from political turmoil of revolution and war. As seen in Mao’s historic article of “Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society” (1925), the urgent task of separating “enemy” from “friends” and “us” at the battlefield, or more practically that of deciding whether to form the united front with the KMT, dominated the social class discourses. Confronting imperialist invasions, Chinese intellectuals/activists also applied the notion of “classes” to the international context and Mao’s “New Democracy” (1940) almost finalized such an approach. This study also approaches the “social class” in relation to the relevant notions of the modern times such as “self,” “society,” “nation” and “imperialism.”

**Keywords:** Class, Class Struggle, Revolution, Practice, Social Darwinism, Mutual Aid Theory, Society, Modern Subject, Minzu (ethnic-nation)

## I . Introduction

The question of whether the Chinese discourses on social class should be seen as a creative development or an unorthodox application of Marxist ideas has invited intense debates but it becomes less controversial when it comes to the question of whether it was essential for the success for Chinese Revolution. Based on a historical examination of the intellectual and popular discourses on social class in early twentieth century China and also a trans-regional survey of the Chinese and Japanese (and Korean) usages of the Chinese-character

word, I will explore the sociopolitical context and characteristics of Chinese appropriation of “social class” (*jiejì*). I will focus on the early period of its appropriation, that is, from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century before 1949. I will examine representative writings on social class by Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, Sun Yat-sen, Cheng Fangwu, Guo Moruo and Mao Zedong. By illuminating their different approaches to the concept, this article tries to present a dynamic understanding of the class discourses in modern China and to answer the question of how the class discourse contributed to the particular way of constructing the modern subject in China.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the ancient political ideal of “great harmony” (*Datong*) was replaced by “competition” and “survival” of the social evolution theory and then yielded to “contradiction” and “struggle” of the Marxist class theory. The modern Chinese discourses of social class were never detached from political turmoil of revolution and war. As seen in Mao’s historic article of “Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society” (1925), the urgent task of separating “enemy” from “friends” and “us” at the battlefield, or more practically that of deciding whether to form the united front with the KMT, dominated the social class discourses. Confronting imperialist invasions, Chinese intellectuals/activists also applied the notion of “classes” to the international context and Mao’s “New Democracy” (1940) almost finalized such an approach. This study will also approach the “social class” in relation to the relevant notions of the modern times such as “self,” “society,” “nation” and “imperialism.”

## II. Traditional and Romantic Appropriations:

### 1. The Modern Self and *zhishi jieji* (Intellectual Class)

In the early stage of its reception, the word, “*jieji*” (social class) in modern China was loosely—often through secondary sources in Japanese, grounded on Karl Marx’s original ideas. Such “unorthodox” appropriations created complex and interesting textures of the social class discourse, which reflected various branches of intellectual thoughts and sociopolitical conditions of the times.

It is known that the reformist, Liang Qichao introduced the term, “*jieji*” to China, with a meaning similar to contemporary usage, for the first time in 1899, shortly after he fled to Japan. In his essay “Lun Zhongguo yu ouzhou guoti yitong” (On Similarities and Differences between the State Forms of China and Europe) published in *Qingyibao* (8 June 1899), he states the differences between the two state forms as follows: “We can say that China is a country without the noble class (*guizu*), and that the people are the people without classes (*wu jieji zhi min*). This is also one of the great differences between the Chinese state form and the European one.”<sup>1)</sup> In another essay published in the same periodical in the same year, Liang continues to use the term, *jieji* and reinterprets Kang Youwei’s “Sanshi shuo” (Theory of Three Stages) applying Karl Marx’

1) “秃钞国师谓夙贵症夙国，徐谗师谓夙阶级夙论。憊繁为钞国国体与欧窠愚异夙靡繁。” (Liang 1899 a).

s class struggle theory.<sup>2)</sup> In the initial introduction of the notion into China, class was labeled as "European." Such a diagnosis that stresses the lack of class conflicts in modern Chinese society dominated the early class discourse. Intellectuals including communists were compelled to start from and respond to the assumption that social class is European reality.

Without referring to Marx's definition of social class, Liang used the term to indicate hierarchical distinctions. As scholars previously pointed out, the early conception of social class in China was influenced heavily by traditional usage. In pre-modern Chinese, the word, "jieji" existed and denoted "steps" (*taijie*), "levels" (*dengji*), "official rank" (*guanpin*), "stage or phase" (*duanluo*) (Wang 2011, 90). Philip Kuhn argues that modern Chinese perception of the word was never totally detached from the visual image of "steps" in the ideographic origin.

The word, *jieji*, which is now used routinely to translate 'social class', is a very old ideographic compound. Like many other social terms, it was taken over and given new meaning by the Japanese around the turn of the twentieth century and then reintroduced into China. Originally, the ideograph *jie* seems to mean steps, like rungs on a ladder; and *ji* is the order of threads in a fabric. The term thus connotes hierarchical degrees on a continuum, rather than groups of

2) The three stages (worlds) are "juluan shi", "shengping shi" and "taiping shi" which roughly correspond to autocracy, monarchy and communism. (Liang 1899 b) Philip A. Kuhn says that the modern concept of "jieji" appeared for the first time in this piece while Wang Guiren believes Liang's essay published in June 1899 as the first instance. (Kuhn 1984, 18; Wang 2011, 91).

people. ...The point here is that *jieji* does not refer to groups of persons, but to ranks on a scale. (Kuhn 1984, 17)

I also pay particular attention to the fact that the word in pre-modern usage did not mean “social groups” and argue that “jieji” in twentieth century China was often used to identify an individual as well as groups. The word was used often to discern one’s position in society rather than to analyse the social structure as I will show in my discussion of Mao Zedong’s famous lecture, “Analysis of Each Class in Chinese Society” (1925). In the Maoist period, “jieji” was a decisive element for one’s identity or a way of answering the question of “who are you?” The controversy whether social class is inherited (*xuetong lun*) and the neighbouring notions like “chushen” and “chengfen” are indicative of such a tendency in the Chinese appropriation of social class.

In particular, it merits attention that the early discourse of social class coincided with the emergence of the notion of the modern individual in China. The two discourses were interrelated. In the early adoption of the word, “jieji,” it was used primarily within the words of “wuchan jieji” (proletariat) and “zhishi jieji (intellectual class).”

The main classes of capitalism, the proletariat (workers, wage-earners) and the bourgeoisie (capitalists) were translated as “wuchan jieji” and “zichan jieji” respectively. Unlike the Marxist notion of social class, the two Chinese terms do not point to the relations of “production,” in particular “zichan jieji” and “zhongchan jieji,” invited misunderstandings. Guo was arguably the first writer who used the word, “wuchan jieji” in

modern Chinese literature in his famous poem “Goddess” (*Nüshen*) in 1921. The poem is a good example.

I am a proletarian (wuchan jieji zhe):  
Because except my bare body,  
I don't have any private properties (siyou caichan).

如憊个匍产阶级碎：  
嫚为沝鸪个铄条条钻沝椏，  
洵么捐耗财产濂没耗。

Here “wuchan jieji” is described as “class without private properties.”<sup>3)</sup> As well known, Guo's early poems fused Romanticism with revolutionary themes employing foreign or exotic terms, ideas and images. In this poem, “wuchan jieji” was also a neologism recently introduced to the Chinese intellectual scene and the exotic term contributed to the Romanticist portrayal of “I.” The addition of the suffix “zhe” to “wuchan jieji” fixing the noun as a singular noun rather than a collective noun. In China, “social class” was often used to denote an individual's identity.

In this context, “zhishi jieji” or “zhishi fenzi” (intellectual class) represented the modern self more frequently and directly. Philip Kuhn finds Mao's first use of the term *jieji* in print in his 1921 piece, “Founding Proclamation of the Human Self-Study University.” In this piece, Mao categorises two main classes as the “intellectual class” (*zhishi fenzi*) and

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3) In 1930s, Guo redressed his misunderstanding about the word.

the “commoner class” (*pingmin jieji*). As Kuhn points out, the categories are a mere application of the “old Confucian dichotomy between those who labour with their minds and those who labour with their hands.” (Kuhn 1984, 19) Compared with Mao, Chen Duxiu provided an analysis which was closer to the Marxist ideas in “The National Revolution of China and Each Social Class” (1923). Chen defines the “intellectual class” as the petit-bourgeoisie and mentions the traditional categories of *si min* (four occupational divisions of the people: *shi* (scholars), *nong* (peasants), *gong* (artisans), *shang* (merchants)) only to explain the vacillating characteristic of the petit-bourgeoisie between the noble class (*guizu*) and the commoners (*pingmin*, that is *nong*, *gong*, *shang*) (Chen 1923).

As seen from the examples, the early understandings of “social class” in China were shaped greatly by traditional usage of the word, “jieji” and the longstanding categorization of the people like “si min.” “Social class” discourse, thus, remained attached to the meanings of hierarchical ranks and functions or occupations. Mao Zedong’s ideas of social classes in China developed later but maintained a function-based viewpoint. For example, he divides social classes in China into four or five categories: workers, peasants, intellectuals, other working people and the national bourgeoisie even in his later essay, “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People” (1967). Joachim Israel also points out that Mao identified classes “by their functions” in this essay. (Israel 1970, 21)

Under such circumstances, the “intellectuals” remained as an independent class category in analyses of social class in modern China.

As well as reflecting the increasing interest in the modern individual's self-identity, the popularity of the "intellectual" discourse is also sign of the emergence of the collective group in Chinese society.

In English, from the late 18th century to the 20th century the plural term—the intellectuals—has acquired the connotation of being somewhat independent from established institutions, both in the church and in politics (Williams 19, 169–171; Anton etc. 1994, 285–308). Amongst Chinese men of letters, people who sought and asserted such independence came to form a collective identity in society, and this collective identity was internally bound to the modern educational institution of the college or university. The abolition of the civil service examination in 1905 marked the rupture that occurred between educated youth and state power. The younger generation, who had received a modern college education, set themselves apart from the former reform-minded generation, which included Yan Fu (1854–1921), Liang Qichao (1873–1929) and even Chen Duxiu (1880–1942). The great change also occurred after Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940) took the helm of the National Beijing University (hereafter *Beida*) in 1917 (Qian 1999, 126–43). Whilst before 1917 students at *Beida* were seen merely as official apprentices, after 1917 they became independent from state or imperial power and formed a critical force against the state.

By the early 1920s, the Chinese equivalent for the English word "intellectual," *zhishifenzi* or *zhishijieji*, had not yet appeared in the Chinese language. Similar to the case of Japanese, the loanword,

“yintieligengzhuiya” (intelligentsia) was used.<sup>4)</sup> Before *zhishifenzi* became deeply rooted in Chinese discourses, it was the term “new youth”—rather than the loanword *yintieligengzhuiya*—that was used most widely to convey meanings equivalent to “intellectuals” in English—with all the connotations of independence from the established powers that this term implies. The word “xin” (new) was attached to “qingnian” (youth) in 1916, a year after the launch of the pioneering magazine, *Qingnian zazhi*, in order to suggest the connotation of progressiveness, and the word became a popular metaphor for the collective of “intellectuals” as self-conscious critic of society.<sup>5)</sup> Under the influences of the traditional understanding of “jieji” and the emergence of the social group of the “educated youth,” the social class discourse contributed to the construction of the modern self in China.

4) In Japanese, the loanword from the Russian word “intelligentsia,” *interi*, was in use before their own coinage—*chishikijin* or *chishikikaikyū*—achieved widespread currency. *Gogen tankyū* (Etymological research), Tokyo: Meiji shoyin, 1986. In China, the loanword *yintieligengzhuiya* also preceded the Chinese version *zhishifenzi*. For instance, in his renowned article “From Literary Revolution to Revolutionary Literature” (1928), Cheng Fangwu (1897-1984) used the loanword *yintieligengzhuiya* rather than *zhishifenzi*. “Danshi, dangshi nazhong youxian jieji de ‘yintieligengzhuiya’ (Intelligentsia=zhishi jieji, originally in Cheng Fangwu’s text) duiyu shidai ji meiyou shifen de renshi, duiyu sixiang yi meiyou chedi de liaojie,…” (However, at the time, the leisured classes of the intelligentsia did not have sufficient awareness of the epoch or a thorough understanding of ideas.) (Cheng 1928). The version cited here can be found in (Zhang 1934, 380).

5) The magazine led and represented “the cult of youth” (Schwarcz 1986, 55-61). As Charlotte Furth has stated, “youth,” by virtue of its comparative freedom from the so-called backward drag of the inherited environment, was the social group most suited to the role of instigating progressive change. Youth was also the symbol of the biological energies which animated the forces of the universe as a whole (Furth 1983, 400). However, as Chen Duxiu made clear, age itself cannot guarantee the socially reliable criterion of “youth consciousness.” (Chen 1916, 1-4).

### III. Class Struggle and Historiography: Social Darwinism and Mutual Aid Theory

Social Darwinism was introduced to China towards the end of the 19th century and exerted great influences on Chinese intellectuals' political thoughts including their views of social class, in particular class struggle. It was also greatly influential in modern Korea and Japan. Vladimir Tikhonov (aka, Park Noja) argues that "For some time (approximately between 1900s and 1920s), Social Darwinism functioned as a common, unifying mood of thinking for almost all major groups and personalities of modernization-oriented urban intelligentsia" (Tikhonov 2001, 67). In Japan, Eugenics, which was steered by the government for a geopolitical application drove Social Darwinism to a radical direction.

The notion of "society" was introduced to modern China in parallel with Social Darwinism. Most Chinese intellectuals welcomed Herbert Spencer's synthetic philosophy that sees "society" as a "biological organism." Intellectual enthusiasm was directed less to special characteristics of human society than to applications of natural laws to human society. In other words, "society" was almost seen as an indistinguishable part of nature or cosmos (*tian*). Frank Dikötter also associates the popularity of Spencer's Social Darwinism among modern Chinese intellectuals to the fact that they were "used to a symbolic universe that stressed the interrelation of human and cosmic processes."<sup>6)</sup>

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6) Dikötter also points out that Chinese appropriation of Darwinism is closer to

The celebrated Yan Fu's (1854-1921) translation (1896) of Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*, *Tian yan lun* (1896), is a good example that represents the Chinese assimilation of the notion of "society." Yan Fu changed Huxley's text to an almost unrecognizable degree and the translation shows textual intricacies and inconsistencies. If one applies the conventional standard of translation, "fidelity to the original," Yan Fu's translation may be seen as "loose" but I, instead, see such a radical transformation as a reflection of Yan Fu's intense engagement with Huxley's text and also of his firm command of it. Yan Fu took several months of efforts to coin neologisms and in his neologisms, *tian* (cosmic) is used more often than *ren* (human). I think Yan Fu tried to turn Darwinian sociology into political philosophy using the moral concepts of Confucianism. The discursive mantle shifts from the social into the cosmic. This is related to Yan Fu's view that embraces the cosmos as monistic rather than finding a separation between the natural and the human worlds. In this sense, Yan Fu's monistic philosophy is closer to Herbert Spencer who believed in the universality of natural law than to Huxley who stressed ethics as an exclusively human nature. Thus, I think when Yan Fu translated the English text into Chinese, he changed the language of society into the language of the cosmos and such a transformation reflects the differences between modern European intellectual trends and modern Chinese approaches. Quite a few modern Chinese intellectuals, not having experienced a revolutionary

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Lamarckian paradigm than to Darwin's original ideas because in Darwinian thoughts, unlike in Lamarckian thoughts, social progress could not be transmitted through inheritance. (Dikötter 1992).

humanist epoch such as the Renaissance, maintained the Buddhist conception of the subject. For example, Zhang Taiyan's 章太炎 (1868-1936) idea of the subject, "geti," 个体 which had a great impact on modern Chinese intellectuals, particularly on Lu Xun, conceived the subject within Nature, not particularizing it as the human subject within society.

The "class struggle" discourse in modern China shared such an intellectual trend and the focus also lain in "nature" rather than "human society." The "class struggle" discourses relied more on Social Darwinian idea of the "struggle for survival" than on the Marxist analysis of social structure. Reformers such as Liang Qichao and Yan Fu; the KMT leader, Sun Zhongshan; and most of anarchists and even communists understood "class struggle" as an application of the "struggle for survival" theory to human society. Based on social Darwinism including the idea of "natural selection" and the "struggle for survival," a fatalistic view of history became dominant in early twentieth century China.

A detailed investigation of the early translations of "class struggle" into Chinese provides us with a political map of modern China. In early twentieth century China, there were mainly three translations for the phrase: "jieji jingzheng" (class competition), "jieji douzheng" (class struggle), and "jieji zhanzheng" (class war), and a choice of each word generally represents the user's political ideas. "Jieji jingzheng" and "jieji zhanzheng" were used generally by those who were against Marxist idea of "class struggle." For instance, Sun Yat-sen chose the word, "jieji

zhanzheng” over the other options.

Marx argues that society can evolve when there is class war; class war is the impulse of social evolution. It is to say that class war is the cause and social evolution is the result. ... Class war is not the cause of social evolution but a kind of disease which appears when society evolves. (Sun 1956, 776-779)

With the word of “zhanzheng,” Sun expresses his objection to Marxist theory of “class struggle.” He makes it clear that “class struggle” cannot be the cause or the impulse of social evolution. In other words, class struggle cannot be a more fundamental law than social evolution.

In 1919, the renowned Marxist, Li Dazhao was inclined to Kropotkin’s anarchist ideas of the “mutual aid” theory rather than Marx’s “class struggle” theory and he used the word, “jieji jingzheng” and “zhanzheng” instead of “douzheng.” It is known that Li Dazhao’s contact with Marxism began in 1918 and came to reach a mature level of understanding around 1923. In a short essay titled, “Jieji jingzheng yu huzu” (Class Competition and Mutual Aid), he shows his support for Kropotkin’s anarchist vision of “mutual aid” which is inflected by Social Darwinism: “From insects, birds, animals and human beings, every creature evolves according to the rule of mutual aid not according to war (*zhanzheng*)” (Li 1919 b). In the similar period, he published a systematic summary of his Marxist ideas, in which he continued to present a Darwinian interpretation of “class struggle.”

Seen from this, the class competition in the organism of society is on a par with the principle that Wilhelm Roux realised: ‘the competition between every different organ and cell will carry out within an organism.’ All lives in the cosmos act towards ‘self-expansion.’ ‘Self-expansion’ is the basic impulse for evolution of every biological and sociological organism and the uncontroversial and universal tendency of the biological world. Class competition is one of the countless outputs and results of such a tendency (Li 1919 a).

Peter Kropotkin was popular among Chinese anarchists and his influence was crucial at the time. His article on “anarchism” in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and his “Appeal to Youth” were translated and widely read among young radicals. Kropotkin’s anarchism was welcomed by Chinese youth mainly because he emphasised the importance of science. Most of the Chinese anarchists shared an optimistic recourse to “scientism” with participants in other new culture movements. Kropotkin’s “Mutual Aid” theory (*Huzu lun*) was in tension with Marx’s “Class Struggle” theory as seen from Li Dazhao’s writings. The “Mutual Aid” theory may have been more influential than the “Class Struggle” theory.

According to a survey of 28 periodicals around the May Fourth movement, there were about 161 essays on the topic of ‘huzu lun’ or ‘huzu’ and among which 67 pieces were published in anarchist

periodicals and 94 were published in *Dongfang zazhi*.<sup>7)</sup>

As seen from Sun Yat-sen's and Li Dazhao's quotes above, the question of "class struggle" is closely connected to one's view of history. A Marxist usually takes Marxism as a "*Weltanschauung*, i.e. a combination of philosophical discourse, economical-sociological analysis and a political program of action" (Israel 1970, 11-12). The historical materialism centering on "class struggle" provides a methodology—not a method. Marxism is viewed as social science but does not deny ideological elements in it. "Class Struggle" in Marx's ideas is a material impulse that causes historical progress and thus can be applied to the whole human history. Yet, for quite a few modern Chinese intellectuals, "struggle for survival" is a "universal" law and on the contrary, "class struggle" has only limited applicability: it can be applied to the west or to the past. For instance, Li Dazhao stressed that Marx had applied his class struggle theory only to the past not to the whole history.

Marx never admitted that class competition starts and ends together with human history. He only applies the class competition theory to the past of the human history not to the whole of past, present and future. It is better to say that his class struggle theory is an application to the past history than to say that it is an element of his materialist view of history (Li 1919 a).

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7) "After the May Fourth, the political idea of 'Mutual Aid between workers and intellectuals' (gong du hu zu) became very dominant." (Wang 2011, 94, 96).

Reformists including Hu Shi and Liang Qichao and communists such as Chen Duxiu and Qu Qiubai had debates on the issues of social class, class struggle and social reform in the years between 1919 and 1921. The reformists argued that there was no class struggle in China because industries did not develop enough and called for cooperation between workers and capitalists.

Unlike Li Dazhao, another prominent Marxist, Chen Duxiu chose the phrase, "jieji douzheng" and viewed "class struggle" as the essence of *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848). (Wang 2011, 97) It is also noteworthy that Mao Zedong accepted the class discourse within the phrase of "class struggle" (*jieji douzheng*), rather than simply as "class" (*jieji*). He reflects his reading experience around 1920 as follows:

I remember in 1920, I read for the first time [Karl] Kautsky's *Class Struggle, Manifesto of the Communist Party* translated by Chen Wangdao and *History of Socialism* written by an English man [Thomas Kirkup]. I realised that human history is the history of class struggle and class struggle is the impulse of social progress, and had an initial understanding of methodologies for epistemological questions... But in these books... I only grasped four characters: "jieji douzheng" (class struggle), and began to study class struggles in reality (Mao 1941, 21-22).

This quote also shows what kinds of books were available for Chinese intellectuals to contact and develop the class struggle theory.

Chinese intellectuals relied greatly on secondary sources on the topic. *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels 1848) was the primary text which was available for Chinese readers among other writings written by Karl Marx. It was mentioned and introduced from 1899 and (selective) translations started to appear from 1905. Probably due to the length, *Das Kapital* (1867, 1885, 1894) started to be published as late as in 1930. (trans. Chen Qixiu, Shanghai: Shanghai Kunlun chubanshe). Thus *Manifesto of the Communist Party* influenced the early reception of the class theory more than *Capital* did. The former was written from a more political perspective than the latter. Although *Manifesto* also defines social class as a position in the process of production, from the first chapter it highlights the exploitative relationship between the “oppressor” and the “oppressed.” Chinese appropriation of “social class” did not center on “relations of production” and it can be understood partly from this fact.

#### IV. International Expansion of Class Relations: Imperialism and Revolution

In modern China, the special circumstances of semi-colonialism imposed an international dimension on the discourses of social class and class revolution (*jiejingeming*). While reformists and KMT leaders like Zhu Zhixin, in particular after Sun Yat-sen’s death, argued social classes did not exist in China due to immature industrialization, communists like Chen Duxiu thought underdevelopment generated a complicated class structure in modern China. The concept of “ethnic-nation” (*minzu* (C),

*minjok* (K), *minzoku* (J)) adds more complexities to the class analysis of modern Chinese society. In early twentieth century China (and also Korea), the major form of collectivity seemed to be represented by the concept of the ethnic-nation. It can be seen as a symbiosis of “traditional ethnocentrism” with “modern social Darwinism.” In China, the reformers began to use the term, *minzu*, in 1903 in an attempt to find a political rationale for the state. Ironically, the term was coined and actively circulated by the Japanese imperialists in order to justify colonization in the region, and became the major concept for geopolitical imaginations in East Asia.

[T]he role that ethnic concepts of the nation, as distinct from the political state, played in Japanese attempts to reorganize East Asia as an arena of ethnic national cooperation under Japanese state leadership, thus giving the region a new identity distinct from those of modern (Western) independent states. This reimagination of East Asia as an arena of ethnic national identities drew from new definitions of the nation as an ethnic people (*minzoku*) that were enjoying wide circulation during and after World War I. (Doak 2001, 86)

The wide circulation of “ethnic-nation” indeed contributed to the replacement of the state/(civil) society model with the state/ethnic-nation model. This provides a partial explanation why the sociological concepts of “society” and “class” did not sufficiently develop in East Asia.

“Ethnic-nation” was an important issue of the Chinese revolution. In modern China, the discourse of class was led mainly by those who were actually involved in politics or social activists, rather than scholars or academics (Wang 2011, 94). Thus the culmination of the class debates is the practical and urgent question of class revolution (*jieji geming*). Under the imperialist powers’ dominance, Chinese communists (and Korean intellectuals of the same period) distinguished *minzu zibenjia* (*minjok jabonga* (K): National Capitalists) from *maiban zibenjia* (*maepan jabonga* (K): Comprador Capitalists). In actuality, the KMT represented the class and the CCP’s political stance towards the national capitalist class changed mainly according to their political relationship with the KMT. The CCP’s vision for class revolution was outlined primarily by Chen Duxiu. After analyzing social classes in China, Chen proposed “guomin geming” (lit. National Citizens’ Revolution). It is a revolution for the bourgeois democratic goals but it will be carried out by the allied classes including proletariat and national bourgeoisie. Thus, it can be seen as a precursor of Mao’s “New Democracy.”

## V. Mao Zedong’s Understanding of Social Class

In view of the imminent revolution in Republican China, “social class” was used to answer a practical question of who are the enemies and who are the allies. Mao Zedong’s famous essay, “Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society” (1925), indeed began with the question,

Who are our enemies? Who are our friends? This is a question of

the first importance for the revolution. The basic reason why all previous revolutionary struggles in China achieved so little was their failure to unite with real friends in order to attack real enemies. (Mao 1925, 3)

Mao starts the supposedly analytical essay on social class with the unexpectedly subjective question. It indicates the purpose of his “analysis”: it is not a systematic or objective survey of Chinese society that provides knowledge to general readers but rather a handbook that gives political instructions to cadets and comrades for the revolution.

Such pragmatic appropriations of Marxist ideas by Mao Zedong have invited debates over whether he is an orthodox Marxist. Slavoj Žižek suggests that we should understand orthodoxy in terms of dialectics of constructing orthodoxy. In his reading of Mao’s texts, he argues that “the way this violent transplantation into a foreign context radically affects the original theory itself, so that, when this theory ‘returns to itself in its otherness’ reinvents itself in the foreign context.” (Žižek 2007, 4) I will also take Mao’s revolutionary pragmatism seriously and apply the principle coherently to the interpretation of his ideas. In this context, if we rank the importance of the major concepts in his ideas, I believe the order should be revolution—practice—class—contradiction rather than contradiction—class—practice—revolution. In order to understand his view on contradiction, one should go back to his writings on class; to comprehend his ideas on class, one should read his works on practice; and the key concept of all four words is revolution.

Mao's view of social class reflects such revolutionary pragmatism. Arif Dirlik argues that in Mao's ideas, class does not merely signify the social structure fixed by the economic relations between those who own the means of production and those who do not.

In his [Mao Zedong's] delineation of classes in China, he was interested not in a structural determination of class in terms of relationship to the means of production, but in the identification of the status of social groups in terms of hierarchy of power, and especially in terms of relations of exploitation (Dirlik 1983, 196).

Drawing on E. P. Thompson's view of class, Dirlik interprets class in Maoism as relations. Thompson unfolds a rather creative take of Marx's view on class. He criticises the view that sees class as a "thing" "structure" or "category" saying it is not what Marx meant. Instead he argues class is an "historical phenomenon" and a "historical relationship."<sup>8)</sup> Furthermore, he sees the phenomenon or the relationship as the process of making as he shows through the title, "The making of the English working class." From this context, Dirlik moves on to emphasize the significance of class consciousness in Mao's ideas. In dialectical materialism, class consciousness and practice mutually affect and form the other. If we follow Mao's route of thought, practice becomes more principal and operational than class consciousness. Mao presents a specified interpretation of the principle of Marxist materialism,

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8) "By class I understand an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness" (Thompson 1965, 9).

“existence (reality) decides consciousness” as “the objective realities of class struggles and national struggles decide our ideas and emotions.” (Mao 1937, 852) As class struggles and national struggles are seen as the most important part of the objective reality, practice has more determinant power over class consciousness during revolutions.

Man’s social practice is not confined to activity in production, but takes many other forms—class struggle, political life, scientific and artistic pursuits…… Of these other types of social practice, class struggle in particular, in all its various forms, exerts a profound influence on the development of man’s knowledge. (Mao 1992, 53)

In light of the importance of “social practice” in Mao’s ideas, the seemingly uncomplicated catchphrase, “*wei renmin fuwu*” (Serve the People) should also be treated seriously, in particular considering the fact that it came to the fore after the period between 1936 and 1937 in which Mao is known to have studied Marxism in a serious manner. His major philosophical and political works including “On Practice” (1937), “On Contradiction” (1937) and “On New Democracy” (1940) came out after the period.<sup>9)</sup> The propagandist phrase, “*wei renmin fuwu*,” has great significance in configuring class relations in his ideas. *Fuwu* in Mao’s phrase of “*wei renmin fuwu*” is essential to the “process” of making class relationships. For Mao, social class is not the fixed structure of the

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9) Although there exists controversies over whether the works were written at the time or how much was ‘copied’ from the Soviet philosophical texts, it is widely accepted that the basic and original ideas in particular, principal contradictions were formulated around the time.

social groups which are determined by production relations and *fuwu* is dynamic revolutionary practice that creates class consciousness and that (re)constructs the social relationships of class.

## VI. Conclusion

In general, the Chinese assimilation of social class was less led by theoretical concerns than by practical tasks. The social class discourses in early twentieth century China developed in association or competition with various branches of thoughts, and reflected particular political conditions of the times. Traditional usage of the term had a lasting impact on the modern perception, which preserved the iconic image of the steps in the court rituals. The denotation of one's position and function in the political hierarchy strongly remained within the modern conception. Social Darwinism also steered the direction of the class discourse during the early period of its adoption. Under the strong influence of the "struggle for survival" discourse, determinism was noticeable among the modern Chinese intellectuals. The influence of anarchism, in particular, K. Propotkin's anarchist communism was dominant among intellectual circles and Propotkin's "mutual aid" theory (*Huzu lun*) was in competition with the class struggle discourse.

In the beginning of the Chinese adoption of the social class discourse, their interest was drawn to the intellectual class (*zhishi jieji*). Guo Moruo's romantic poem, *Goddess*, for instance, uses the term of proletariat to identify himself. This romantic conception of the social class points to an

important direction of the Chinese appropriation, that is, a tool to identify an individual rather than a tool to analyse the social structure.

Marx's idea on social class is firmly based on materialism and it is a way of explaining "capitalist society" or "the mode of production in capitalism." So the main question was not whether one can change the class position but how the capitalist class relations will change into a new mode. The social class was not viewed as one's identity but as the social condition. Yet in modern Chinese application of the idea, class was often seen as one's identity and during the Cultural Revolution, it almost became a destiny. So often the discursive attention was drawn to the question of whether one can change his/her class status. Maoist answer to the question was mostly positive as Maoist ideas of social class stresses "practice" as a way of forming one's social class.

In early twentieth century China, the class discourses influenced shaping the modern notion of the self. The modern individual was often located under the umbrella category of social class. In order to understand the Chinese appropriation of "social class" and the construction of the "self," I have explored the question of how the idea of "society" was introduced and imagined in early twentieth century China. The notion of "society" was somewhat foreign to the Chinese intellectual thoughts, which were familiar with more cosmic visions as seen in Yan Fu's *Tianyan lun*. In this translation, Yan Fu made radical changes to Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* coining numerous neologisms. I have argued that Yan Fu's translation shifted Huxley's text from a sociological paradigm to a philosophical or a cosmic paradigm.

The self was located within the relationship between “human beings” (*ren*) and the “universe” (*tian*), rather than within the relationship between the “individual” and “society.” The autonomy of human “society” was not fully acknowledged in modern China. Popularity of “ethnic-nation” (*minzu/minzoku/minjok*) in East Asia may, to some extent, explain the slow and unenthusiastic acceptance of the notion of “society” in the region. Japanese imperialists actively circulated the “*minzu-guojia*” (ethnic nation-state) model in East Asia to justify the existence of one state in the region and the term, “*minzu*” greatly contributed to the imagining of the self in China and Korea. The notion of “social class” was also in negotiation and competition with the discourses of “ethnic-nation” (*minzu*) in China. “National bourgeoisie” (Chinese: *minzu zichan jieji*, Korean: *minjok jasan gyegeup*) in China and Korea is an example. The Chinese assimilation of “social class” shows a dynamic practice of constructing the modern subject from a cosmic vision. Modern collectivity was mainly configured as biological, if not eugenic, organism in popular imaginations, and the Chinese (or East Asian) characteristic still presents the main problematic of nationalism in the region.

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## 사회 계급 개념의 중국적 수용에 나타나는 특징

홍지순

이 논문은 20세기 초 중국 사회계급에 관한 지식인, 대중 담론을 역사적으로 고찰하고 아울러 일본과 한국에서의 계급이라는 한자어 사용에 대하여 조사하며 사회계급 개념의 중국적 수용 과정의 특색과 사회정치적 맥락을 연구한다. 특히 19세기말부터 20세기 초 1949년에 이르는 초기 수용과정에 초점을 맞춰 천쯔시우, 리다자오, 쑨원, 청팡우, 귀모뤄, 마오쩌둥 등 대표적 논자들의 계급 관련 논문들에 나타난 서로 다른 접근을 논의하며 근현대 중국 계급 담론에 대한 역동적 이해를 제공하고자 한다. 근현대 중국에서 사회계급 담론은 결코 혁명과 전쟁의 정치적 소용돌이로부터 동떨어져 발전하지 않았다. 이 논문은 또한 현대 중국 계급 담론이 중국의 현대적 주체에 대한 사회적 인식에 어떻게 작동하였는지를 탐구하기 위하여 계급 개념을 자아, 사회, 국가, 제국주의 등 개념과의 관계 속에서 접근한다.

**주제어:** 계급, 계급 투쟁, 혁명, 실천, 소설 다위니즘, 호조론, 사회, 근대 주체, 민족