

Constitutionalism in the Late Qing: Conception and Practice*

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I

Democracy is the political mainstream in modern times. China has been influenced by it ever since contacts between East and West in the 19th century. During the late Qing period, advocates of democracy in China were divided into two groups, the Revolutionaries, and the Constitutionalists. Though the two groups were equally committed to securing democracy for China, their ideas about how to achieve this goal differed greatly. The Revolutionaries aimed to overthrow the monarchy and establish a republic, whereas, Constitutionalists intended to reform the existing government under the Qing emperor, building on the already established order. They sought to impose a parliamentary system on the current monarchical tradition, hoping to achieve power distribution similar to Great Britain's system of government whereby the monarch would be reduced in status to figurehead of the nation. The Revolutionaries and the Constitutionalists worked independently and competitively to implement their separate strategies. Ultimately, the Manchu Dynasty was overthrown as a result of the many uprisings led by the Revolutionaries. The constitutional movement failed, forced to relinquish its dream of changing the monarchical system through gradual and reform.

The Revolutionaries have since received the praise of contemporary historians, while the Constitutionalists have been subjected to obscurity and criticism. Today, some eighty years later, however, the Constitutionalists unsuccessful efforts appear in a different light as we now perceive that their thoughts and actions significantly influenced the later development of a democratic trend in China's politics. This paper presents a brief account of the constitutional movement, emphasizing its democratic concepts and theories

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as well as the ultimate influence of the Constitutionalists' efforts on such democratic thought as developed in the Republican period.

The Constitutionalists emphasized the need for a parliamentary system. The English term "parliament" was directly transliterated into Chinese (Balimen, 巴力門). The concept of parliament in China was first discussed during the Self-Strengthening Movement (1860-1894), when famous thinkers like Feng Guifen (馮桂芬), Wang Tao (王韜), and Ma Jianzhong (馬建忠) pointed out that a parliament ought to form an important and necessary component of the Chinese political system. They thought that a parliament was the only instrument by which the local people could communicate their thoughts and desires to the emperor. Other thinkers such as Zheng Guanying (鄭觀應), Chen Qiu (陳虬), Chen Chi (陳熾), and Hu Liyuan (胡禮垣), conceived that a parliament would foster the development of closer ties between leaders and people, and help unify the commoners and the elite. Parliaments, they argued, would facilitate the rise of a national consciousness, thus strengthening the country.^① During most of the Self-Strengthening Movement, the sovereignty of the monarch remained unchallenged. Feng Guifen and his contemporaries considered the monarch to possess the "mandate of heaven", fully deserving of respect and obedience. They neither wrote explicitly about human rights, nor did they phrase their words in a fashion that could be construed as threatening the emperor in his position. Instead, they tried to convince the emperor that a parliament would merely assist him rule. Although they might have envisioned a future democratic China, at this time no one actually formulated such thoughts in writing.

Not until 1898 did anyone come out and frankly express the true needs and purposes of a parliament. Kang Youwei, a leader within the Reform Movement (1895-1898), argued, "a parliament is [an institution] where national affairs are settled by consensus of the people." He was the first to proclaim the idea that the common people have the right to make their own political choices.^②

Despite his outspokenness, however, Kang Youwei indicated that the time (1898) was not yet ripe to set up a parliament. Establishing a parliamentary

① 翦伯贊等編，戊戌變法（上海，神州國光社，1953），Vol. I, pp. 9, 55-58, 177-178, 228, 245-247.

② 戊戌變法，Vol. 2, p. 176.

system, therefore, was not the main issue of the reform movement, but Kang Youwei's view formed the central theme of the constitutional movement which began at the start of this century. The Constitutionalist wanted to have a parliament that would frame a constitution and promote political participation by common people.

How did the Constitutionalists emerge as a group? Because of the incompetency and decline of the late Qing Dynasty, people throughout China accepted the need for reform. The Revolutionaries, advocating radical action, proposed a revolution consisting of three stages: military, disciplinary, and constitutional. The more moderate Constitutionalists proposed a theory of autocratic enlightenment warning against any hasty establishment of a democratic system: This was considered both impractical and unwise as the population had to be gradually educated and enlightened with regard to the application and functions of a parliamentary system. Consider, for example, that in the 19th and early 20th century, eighty percent of the Chinese people were illiterate. ③ Both the Constitutionalists and the Revolutionaries felt that the common Chinese would be unable to handle their newly found powers once they became their own political master. If they should be given their political rights too soon, it would be like giving a torch to a baby who, too weak and immature to understand its value, would certainly mishandle it and finally burn himself. ④ The Revolutionaries, for their part, proposed that the people should be educated after the monarchy was toppled. The Constitutionalists, however, theorized that the people had to be educated before any change in government were to take place. Both groups believed in educating the people, but while the Revolutionaries spoke of "discipline", the Constitutionalists used the term "enlightenment"; there was no real difference in substance, only in timing.

The leader of the Revolutionaries and mastermind of the three stage revolution theory was Sun Yat-Sen. The main theorist of the Constitutionalists, and author of the enlightened autocracy theory was Liang Qichao. Sun and Liang, originally friends and comrades in the struggle for a democratic

③ Evelyn Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy in China* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, The University of Michigan Press, 1979), p. 23.

④ 張朋園，梁啟超與清季革命（臺北，中央研究院，1981），pp. 119-136.

system, finally separated because of their different political views. Sun Yat-Sen's three stage theory of revolution is now well known, while the enlightened autocracy theory of Liang remains relatively obscure. This paper, therefore, provides accounts, discussion and analysis of this lesser known theory which the Qing Court put into practice. ⑤

II

The strategy Liang Qichao used to promote a constitutional monarchy can be divided into two phases. In the first phase, Liang adopted a posture of "advising" the Court, gently yet persistently recommending a program of constitutional preparation. Later, when his suggestion was accepted, he immediately implemented phase two, in which he changed his posture of "advice" into one of "demand" in order to press for the immediate establishment of a parliament. The Qing dynasty was so weak and in such a dangerous situation in the early 20th century that it had no feasible way to save itself. Whenever the Revolutionaries launched an uprising, the government only passively used force to suppress them. It were the leaders of the Constitutionalists such as Liang who suggested constitutional monarchy as a way to deal with such disorder. Although they stated their ideas indirectly, their manner was quite persuasive. In 1905 (Guangxu 31), Liang published his article "Autocratic Enlightenment", in the *Xinmin Congbao* (*The New Citizen Miscellanies*). ⑥ In this lengthy article, Liang attempted to refute the Revolutionaries while at the same time persuade the Qing court to accept reform. He thought that China, during the early 20th century, faced with surrounding imperialism, should avoid a revolution by instituting a constitutional monarchy. He said that revolution would lead China into such a chaotic situation that it would give the imperialists an opportunity to further divide China. Constitutionalism, he argued, in seeking to reform the government, need not cause any chaos or revolt, but in order to maintain a parliament it was indispensable to give the Chinese people sufficient education. Otherwise, constitutionalism, like a revolution would also result in "chaos".

⑤ 梁啟超，「開明專制論」，新民叢報，No. 3-5 of the 4th year (1905). Hereafter, direct quotations without references are from this title. For Liang Qi-chao's thought on democracy, see Andrew J. Nathan, *Chinese Democracy* (New York, Knopff, 1985), pp. 45-66.

⑥ 梁啟超，「申論種族革命與政治革命之得失」，新民叢報，No. 4, 4th year (1906), p. 60.

Thus Liang suggested to the Qing court the policy of autocratic enlightenment as a way to prepare for constitutionalism. Liang's suggested transition period would not only prevent the Qing government from lashing out in reaction to a perceived decline in power, but would also give the unprepared Chinese time to emphasize education and cultivate necessary political skills. Liang's method seemed reasonable.

Liang's idea of autocratic enlightenment was influenced by the history of Western enlightenment. Since the 18th century, the idea of political right and political responsibility of people, as well as the idea of giving away power by an autocratic king was first inspired by political thinkers in Europe. This political notion unified the king and the people, allowing Western power to gradually become strong. Japan followed the same steps after twenty-two years of preparation; "respecting the power of the emperor, leading people to citizenship, the Japanese reached their goal of reformation". Liang was interested in the idea that the emperor have an enlightened attitude, which would inspire the people's political rights. Thus Liang believed and clearly expressed that during the transition from emperor to constitutional monarch, China's Qing emperor could continue his autocracy, provided he assume an enlightened attitude, accept reforms in the political structure, and establish a compulsory educational policy to advance literacy of the people.

How long should this period of autocratic enlightenment last? Liang's attitude was influenced by the Meiji Restoration. He wrote, "Japan's period of autocratic enlightenment took more than twenty years, China should have no less time." He expressed that for China, "during times of peace, with a strong government and talented administrators exerting every effort to catch up, the minimum amount of time required to reach the goal of Constitutionalism would be ten to fifteen years".^⑦ However, he could not give a specific time period, so at another time he said again, "according to my estimation, it would not be possible in less than ten to twenty years."^⑧

Liang Qichao hoped that the Qing dynasty would accept his suggestion toward constitutional preparation. Assuming a posture of "advising" the government, he continually wrote on the subject of Constitutionalism by

⑦ 梁啟超，「答某報第四號對本報之駁論」，新民叢報，No. 7, 4th year (1906), p. 49.

⑧ *ibid.* p. 55.

pointing out the advantages and benefits it offered. Beginning in 1903 (Guangxu 29), his writings appeared in *Xinmin Congbao*, characterized by an attitude of moderation and persuasion. He refused to hear of revolution in China, yet at the same time he pressed the Qing government to accept his theory of autocratic enlightenment. He asked his fellow Constitutionalists to support him by submitting articles to newspapers and periodicals. He encouraged them saying "when we gain one step toward enlightenment, we increase the power of the people in the same proportion and come all the more close to Constitutionalism."^⑨ Liang also had secret contacts among some of the top ranking officials within the Qing government, and often made suggestions persuading them to accept his ideas. In fact, Liang's persuasive efforts with these higher level officials came to fruition in 1905, when five of these men were sent abroad for constitutional observation. Putting forward every effort for his cause, Liang also wrote for the well known officer Duan Fang (端方) various articles concerning constitutional observation which amounted to some 200,000 words.

In time, the constitutional movement paved the way for the acceptance of autocratic enlightenment theory and practice. In 1906, the Qing government proclaimed its adoption of a nine year program toward constitutional monarchy, after which time a formal parliament would be called, with which we will deal later. Here it must be observed that Just when the Qing government agreed to accept a transitionary period of constitutional preparation, Liang changed his attitude abruptly, demanding a call for full parliament then and there.

Despite the fact that the proposed nine year program of constitutional preparation was actually much shorter than the ten to twenty years enlightenment period originally envisaged by Liang, he did have his reasons for this apparently contradictory reversal. In the past, Liang's opposition against an ad-hoc establishment of a parliament was based on his concern over the low level of education throughout China, which made him pessimistic about the people's ability to operate local and national assemblies. At this time, however, he felt modification of his original position was necessary. He now argued that since the level of education throughout China was comparatively

⑨ 丁文江，梁任公先生年譜長編初稿（臺北，世界書局，1958），p. 205.

low, the educational requirements for representatives in the assembly were also lower. Since current government officers had been chosen from Chinese society, they had received the same education as other citizens, and should be considered as equals in all respects. Liang pointed out the inconsistency in thought that claimed all those outside the administration were fools. Since the government officers were capable of performing their duties in the government, why assume that citizens would not be capable of deliberating over decisions in parliament? They were all citizens of the nation. One could not claim that citizens can go into the administration on the one hand, but not into the assembly on the other. It would be like saying that with one arm someone can raise one hundred kilos of weight, but with the other, not even a bird's feather. Such an argument, Liang believed, was nonsensical.

While Liang was pointing out that those outside the government were not necessarily ignorant, he did foster the notion of an elitist group, which, working within the citizenry, would be capable of carrying the masses through the difficulties of parliamentary leadership. He indicated out that more than ten years ago, there were people outside the government who initiated the idea of reform and inspired the emperor to cultivate the intelligence of the masses, making the present constitutional movement possible. He went further in his arguments, claiming that those who try to create new trends or alter public opinion, those who try to glorify the national culture, and those who try to protect the national rights, were all outside the government. Furthermore, those who absorb world-wide knowledge, those who gain technical expertise in a profession, and those who grasp the real importance of the time and promote constitutionalism were also outside the government. Thus, he continued to argue, relying on the manifest intelligence of the elite citizenry, it would be safe for China to establish a body of elected political representative.

Liang also pointed out that China was ready for an immediate establishment of parliament because of the restrictions in place concerning elections. Not everybody, after all, could become a political candidate. The standard of education, for example, disqualified the illiterate and unlearned from seeking office. In 1909, the Ziyiju (諮議局, provincial assembly), one of the programs of the constitutional preparation period, was formally

established, and Liang utilized this development to cite further evidence that the representatives in these local assemblies were capable of systematically carrying out their deliberation. An encouraged Liang stated, "the representatives of the Ziyiju are the elite of the common people. Since the representatives of the province can manage smoothly, why should the representatives in the national assembly not be able to do the same? I don't know what the difference is." Liang, therefore, in order to demand that a parliament be called right away, developed the notion of elitism to refute his own previous call for a gradual and transitional march to parliamentary representation of the people.

By the word "elite", Liang meant the gentry class of the time. China since the sixth century had relied on a civil examination system to cultivate competent government bureaucrats educated in the principles of Confucianism to assist the emperor in making decisions. When these people retired from office, they became gentry in their native places, acting as local leaders, making up 2% of the whole population.^⑩ Although the civil examination system was abolished in 1905, the gentry class still existed. Liang believed it proper for the gentry to continue to play their traditional role as local leaders, while at the same time help to usher in a new era of democratic political development by serving as assembly representatives.

Liang Qichao's real interest in pressuring for a parliament right away was to establish a responsible cabinet that could be supervised by the representative system. Under the proposed nine year preparation program, no time reference was offered for the establishment of a cabinet. From Liang's perspective, the Qing court failed to understand that the traditional cabinet (Grand Secretariat) serving a monarch could not perform the functions required of a responsible cabinet in a constitutional system. Increasing pressure on the Qing government, his theory of constitutionalism advanced one step further when he insisted, "if there is a parliament, there should be a responsible cabinet, otherwise, without a parliament there is no responsible cabinet."^⑪

Where Liang had previously sought to "advise" the Qing government to

⑩ Chung-li Chang, *The Chinese Gentry* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1955), pp. 71-164.

⑪ 梁啟超，「爲國會期限警告國人」，國風報，No. 18, of the 1st year, (1910) p. 19.

adopt autocratic enlightenment, now in 1910 he adopted a more assertive, "demanding" posture, to press for assembly, parliament and a responsible cabinet. Liang Qichao's strategy was a flexible one, admittedly adopting appropriate measure for different times and situations. He said, "in demanding a constitution, the central spirit is to establish the institution of supervision. In such a case, the people will no longer be forced to stand as an outsider."^⑫ Emphasizing that in terms of power, what is gained from a "demanding" posture is more than what is grudgingly given away by the emperor, Liang decided to rally the Constitutionalists together to pressure the Qing court to call for the immediate establishment of a parliament and a responsible cabinet. Hoping to recreate for China the successful experience of the British "petition for rights", he utilized the concept of "no tax without representation" as a campaign to pressure for his goals. He emphasized over and over,

There is nothing you gain without paying for it. The road from despotism to constitutionalism is characterized by the limitations of the old power holder, and the successes of the new power demander. Those whose rights are restricted do not give in until they can no longer resist the pressure. But those who want to gain their own rights cannot do so without diligence and labor. If you do not demand, you will of course not gain. Or if by chance you should gain, what is gained will not be a complete whole, so that the piecemeal gains are ineffective... Confucius said, "gain by demand, lose by giving away"^⑬.

At another time Liang wrote, "The demand for national assembly and the demand for responsible government is comparable to those who hunger and thirst for food and drink. You cannot postpone for even one minute. You should not lose your grasp of the immediate need."^⑭ The Constitutionalists, fully inspired by Liang Qichao, were ready and willing to press their demands.

⑫ 梁啟超「雜答某報」，新民叢報，No. 12, 4th year (1907) p. 12.

⑬ 梁啟超，「日本預備立憲時代之人民」，新民叢報，No. 11, 4th year (1907) p. 19.

⑭ 梁啟超，「政治與人民」，政論，No. 1, (1910) pp. 1-55.

III

So far we have touched on the theoretical aspects of the constitutional movement, now we will explore the actual processes that developed during the time of constitutional preparation. The Qing government, it has been stated, proclaimed a nine year preparation program toward constitutionalism. Directly related to political democracy is the establishment of different levels of assemblies, including a central assembly in the capital, provincial assemblies in the provinces, and assemblies in the local districts of towns and villages. Although the Qing government established the Zizhengyuan (資政院) as the “basis of a national assembly”,^⑮ and the Ziyiju as the provincial assembly where “political talents can be prepared for the Zizhengyuan”,^⑯ the Qing court did not in reality take the formation of these organizations seriously. From the Qing perspective, these two bodies of assembly were for appearances only, but were actually never meant to be more than a forum to let representatives practice deliberations. In agreement with Liang Qichao’s theory of autocratic enlightenment, it was assumed that since the Chinese never had any parliamentary experience, the representatives would have to learn everything from scrap.

Although the Zizhengyuan and the Ziyiju were not fully developed democratic institutions, they did nevertheless exercise significant democratic processes such as the election of the representatives, the establishment of the exercise of deliberation in the assembly, and the careful planning of projects and regulations. The election of representatives, after all, is an essential component of democratic government. The Zizhengyuan, with a quota of 200 members, consisted of representatives, half of whom were elected by the population while the other half were directly appointed by the emperor. Those who were elected came from the Ziyiju and constituted what would become the future lower house, while those who were appointed constituted the what would become the future upper house. In this study, we are concerned with those who were elected into the Ziyiju.

The Ziyiju was established in 1909 when China had twenty two provinces. It was decided that each province would have its own provincial assembly,

⑮ 「資政院奏訂資政院院章摺」，清末立憲檔案史料（北京，中華書局，1979），p. 627.

⑯ 「著各省速設諮議局論」，ibid, p. 667.

with the exception of Xinjiang, because it remained underdeveloped. As I have already made some observations about the Ziyiju in a previous study,^① I will not go into a full description in this paper, but only review the structure of this unprecedented representative system in China.

The quota of the Ziyiju was not the same from province to province. Some of the large provinces had as many as 150 representatives, while some of the smaller had only 30 or 40, the whole body totaling 1643 in number. The representative quota for each province was not decided by its population. Indeed, it could not have been, for during the nine year preparation program, the Ziyiju had to be established during the second year of the program, but no population census was taken until the fourth year of the program. Rather, the quota of the assembly was decided by the quota of students who passed the traditional civil examination system. Each province's quota in the provincial assembly was equal to 5% of the province's civil examination student quota. For example, Jiangsu province had a traditional student quota of 2,420, so its quota for representatives in the provincial assembly equaled 121. Guizhou's traditional student quota was 780; 5% equals 39. The decision to link these quotas was arbitrary and apparently too low because some of the local districts received no quota at all to fill with their own representatives.

For those who wanted to vote, qualifications were strict. The minimum educational requirement was to hold either a diploma from middle school or a traditional degree such as Jinshi (進士), Juren (舉人), Gongsheng (貢生), or Shengyuan (生員). The only way a voter could bypass the educational requirement was to hold property valued at 5,000 Chinese dollars or more. The minimum voting age was twenty-five and candidates themselves had to be at least thirty years old. Women had no right to vote, neither could they be candidates. Furthermore, those who had a degraded status in society, such as prostitutes or entertainers, or those who were illiterate, also had no right to vote. From today's perspective, these requirements may seem backward and irrational, but at that time, they were considered proper. Since this was

① 張朋園，立憲派與辛亥革命（臺北，中央研究院，1983），pp. 12-36; P'eng-yuan Chang, "The Constitutionalists", in Mary C. Wright(ed.), *China in Revolution: The First Phase, 1900-1913* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 143-183.

China's first attempt at democratic elections, defects are to be expected. It is not our purpose, however, to concentrate on the defects, but to investigate how many people actually met the qualifications to vote for representatives.

It is difficult to pinpoint the numbers, since some provinces, for example, claimed as many as 160,000 voters (Zhili, or today's Hebei province), while others (Heilongjiang) claimed less than 4,000 voters. Yet if we use claimed provincial populations to make a comparison, we discover that those who had the right to vote totaled less than .5% of the population. Apparently the restrictions noted earlier were responsible for such a low percentage of the population enjoying the right to vote.

The 5,000 yuan requirement seems the most irrational. The Chinese traditionally had the idea that the value of their property should not be revealed, since if they were known as rich people, they would be taxed more heavily. This situation accounts somewhat for the low voter turnout. In addition to this, we must keep in mind that the communication network at the time was insufficient, and many people simply did not know what was going on in China regarding the constitutional preparation program. Furthermore, the officials responsible for registering voters did not take the task seriously and overlooked many qualified people.

Despite the low voter turnout, however this was a genuine election with genuine ballots, and compared to the elections that were to take place in the future, should receive due credit. This election consisted of a double voting system in which the first ballot was cast directly by those who had the right to vote. The first ballot was designed to elect ten times the quota of candidates, which was then narrowed when the elected candidates voted among themselves to select the final body of representatives. Within this double election process, it is the first vote related directly to the people that interests us.

It might appear evident to suppose that in this first election, apathy kept the majority of voters at home. Actually, the reverse seems to be true, as people traveled long distances to cast their ballot. Furthermore, some people perceived the representative position important enough to attempt bribery. An American consulate in Guangdong reported that some candidates offered bribes as high as 200 yuan per vote, while the minimum bribe seemed to be about

40 year.^⑮ It should be noted, however, that bribery was a common phenomenon in China and therefore accepted as normal. Reports from other places in the country show that the election was conducted in an orderly manner.^⑯ A reporter of the *North China Herald* claimed the elections in Shanxi and Shaanxi province were “manifestly successful”.^⑰ On the other hand, the bribery in Guangdong was notorious and severely criticized.^⑱

Given China's lack of experience with the democratic process, the excesses of this election must be overlooked as we consider the results of the balloting. It is interesting to see that of those representatives elected to the Ziyiju, about 4.4% were Jinshi, 20.4% were Juren, 29.8% were Gongsheng, 34.4% were Shengyuan, and about 10% had no degree at all. For those elected to the Zizhengyuan, degree holders accounted for a much higher percentage. 22.4% were Jinshi, 38.8% were Juren, 21.4% were Gongsheng, and 8.2% were Shengyuan. The chairmen and vice chairmen of the Ziyiju chosen throughout the country were predominantly upper level degree holders. 47.6% were Jinshi, 28.6% were Juren, 7.9% were Gongsheng, and 4.8% were Shengyuan. Another significant common factor of the representatives was that about 20% had received Western education. It seems that when the Confucian education system was abolished in 1905, students holding lower level degrees had no other alternative to obtain higher credentials than to seek a Western education abroad in Japan, America, or Europe. The enthusiasm for a Western education seem to have affected higher level degree holders as well. A Japanese investigator reported that fully one third of the representatives of Henan province received a Western education.^⑲ Charles Tenney, American secretary at the ministry in Beijing remarked, “the educated minority who form the Constitutional party possess superior ability and energy, controlling the provincial assemblies and the senate (Zizhengyuan).”^⑳

Many of the representative came from wealthy families. However, we know the 5,000 yuan qualification, which eliminated many potential candid-

⑮ U.S. Department of State, *Records Relating to Internal Affairs of China*, (Washington, D.C. Government Printing Office) (Hereafter cited as U.S.D.S.) 893.00/351/2. (1909)

⑯ 申報，(上海)宣統二(1910)年八月二十二日。

⑰ *North China Herald* (Shanghai), Oct. 30, 1909, p. 250.

⑱ U.S.D.S. 893.00/351/2. (1909)

⑲ Japan's Foreign Affairs Documents. M.T. 1.6.1, 37.

⑳ U.S.D.S. 893.00/492. (1909)

ates, did allow some non-degree holders to join the assembly. In Shanxi province, for example, five candidates were elected who qualified under the 5,000 yuan stipulation, so it is not difficult to imagine that many candidates came from wealthy families. This situation is not surprising since historically, under the Confucian examination system, it was all but impossible to obtain a degree without a wealthy background. As a popular Chinese proverb explains, anyone who must go to labor in the field can not enjoy the "ten years solitude needed for study" (shinian hanchuang, 十年寒窗). Although many of the educated elite claimed to be "gengu-chuanjia (耕讀傳家)" (a scholar farmer), they actually belonged to the landlord class. In any case, anyone who enjoyed the privilege of going abroad enjoyed an opportunity that the poor never had.

It is fair to say that most representatives belonged to the elite class and used their position to control the election. One social scientist has written, "when we say that the voters "chose" their representative, the truth is, that the representative had himself elected by the voters."²⁴ The truth was that those illiterate citizens who made up 80% of the population played virtually no role in the constitutional movement. Yet, Liang Qichao advocated gentry elitism, defending such a phase at a necessary development in the establishment of a democratic system.

The period of constitutional preparation, however, did not completely ignore the need to cultivate political participation by the common citizen. We have to remember that in addition to the establishment of the Ziyiju and the Zizhengyuan, the Qing nine year preparation program also called for the creation of lower level local assemblies in the Xian, towns, and villages. There are some 2,000 Xian in China, but towns and villages were numerous. Given the large numbers involved, it was much more difficult to establish these local assemblies than it was to form the Ziyiju and the Zizhengyuan, but the nine year program called for a whole series of project to overcome the difficulties and train personnel. First, a self government institute was set up in each provincial capital. Delegates were sent in groups of two or four from the local districts to be trained for eight months to one year in the provincial capital. The course at the self government institute included

²⁴ G. Mosca, *The Ruling Class* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1939), p. 154.

instruction in the framework of the constitution, general principles of law and the election process, population census techniques, and general knowledge of constitutionalism in a democratic society.²⁵ Finding competent teachers proved a difficult task, but the positions could be filled by students who fortunately happened to be returning from study abroad at this time. Some teachers were also recruited from Japan. Upon completion of this training, the delegates went back to their respective districts to establish their own self-government institute and train personnel. Lecturing in the towns and countryside, these delegates explained the meaning of the constitutional preparation to the common people in a vernacular form that even the illiterate could understand.

Yunnan, an underdeveloped province in the Southwest with a self-government institute established in 1908, provides a good example of how this self-government preparation proceeded. During the first year of operation, some 340 personnel were trained, but one year later, enrollment increased and the institute graduated 2,000 students. These 2,000 graduates then returned to their local districts and towns and created their own institute of self-government. By October 1911, the date of the outbreak of the revolution, the total number of self-government institutes in Yunnan numbered 170, and trained personnel numbered more than 5,000. The delegates in Yunnan gave 436 public lectures on the subject of constitutional preparation to as many as 20,000 people.²⁶ Due to the outbreak of the revolution, the personnel trained by these institutes never fully exercised their acquired skills, yet they played a large role in helping to establish the hsien and provincial assemblies later during the Republican period.²⁷

The most significant accomplishments of the nine year preparation period were the establishment of the Ziyiju in 1909 and the Zizhengyuan in 1910. Sitting gracefully in the assembly hall, dignified in their traditional silk jackets and ceremonial robes, the representatives ignored the condescending way in which the Qing government looked down on them and conducted themselves at all times as the real representatives of the Chinese people.

²⁵ 「自治研究所章程」，政治官報，宣統元年（1909）三月十八日。

²⁶ 張朋園，「中國現代化的區域研究——雲貴地區」Chapter 3, (manuscript)

²⁷ Chang Peng-yuan (translated by Andrew J. Nathan) "Political Participation and Political Elites in Early Republican China: The Parliament of 1913-1914" *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 2, (February 1978), pp. 293-313.

During their deliberations, they were able to elegantly and insightfully execute their duties. Western observers surprised to see such elegant demeanor and orderly professionalism could not refrain from complimenting the gentry class so well cultivated by Chinese tradition. ㊟ Observers praised not only the representatives fine demeanor but also the substance of their deliberations, especially concerning matters of economic development which demonstrated their concern for the suffering masses. All signs seemed to indicate that China truly needed such an institution to supervise the Qing government.

There were a number of conflicts between assembly members and Qing provincial governors that deserve our attention. In Hunan province, for example, assembly members protested that the governor bypassed their authority when the selling of bonds was put into practice before the matter was referred to the assembly for a decision. At another time, the authority of the national and provincial assemblies was tested when the governor of Yunnan province raised the price of salt without the approval of the provincial assembly. The Yunnan provincial assembly, appealing to the sympathetic Zizhengyuan in Beijing, decided not to meet until the governor-general revoked his decision. The governor-general in turn appealed to the sympathetic Qing government in Beijing. Tensions mounted until the Zizhengyuan tried to impeach the Gand Councilors (the advisors to the throne over this issue), creating a conflict that contributed to the outbreak of the revolution. The salt issue demonstrates the degree to which the elected officials honored their responsibility. ㊟

In 1909, under the encouragement of Liang Qichao, the 1,643 provincial representatives demanded the establishment of a formal national assembly right away. Three times, each of the provincial assemblies sent delegates to Beijing to organize a petition for an immediate national assembly. When the Zizhengyuan opened in Beijing in 1910, many of the members declared their support for the petition in a nationwide wave of enthusiasm for political participation. With each petition, the tones of dissatisfaction increased. Expressing themselves moderately, the first petition stated, "the national assembly is the most important institution of a constitutional government.

㊟ *North China Herald*, Feb. 18, 1910, p. 359.

㊟ 張朋園，立憲派與辛亥革命，pp. 86-101.

With that, the government can be supervised and push ahead with its reforms and obligation." It also asserted, "a national assembly is the place where people can learn and question what is going on within national public affairs. That is to say, the people have the right to send their own representatives to participate and make their own decision. In such a case the government can increase its tax in order to solve its national difficulties".

The word of the second petition became stronger than before, stating, "the daily affairs are not properly carried out, there are superfluous staff, but no one who will take responsibility... Politics in our country is just like someone marching in the dark holding a candle without lighting it. There is no hope at all."

The language of the third petition was stronger still. Borrowing the famous lines of Liu Xiang (劉向) when he addressed the Cheng Emperor (成帝) of the Han Dynasty (33-7 B.C.), they wrote,

Your Majesty is the descendent of the imperial family which you have the obligation to preserve. If your imperial throne should be removed, you will become a slave of others. Even if you feel no concern for yourself, you must consider your obligations to preserve the shrine of your imperial ancestors. You cannot sit idly, ignoring the situation and waiting for death, which would bring ridicule from every citizen of the country.

Such language amounted to thinly veiled threats of revolution if reforms were not implemented immediately. ③

The reformation movement became stronger as the representatives petitioned the prince regent and other grand counsellors, and lectured throughout Beijing asking people to join their cause. Those who made public speeches used strong language and belligerent attitudes to scold government officials openly. Some derisively declared "we can not have a national assembly without bloodshed," while other cut off their fingers to sign the petition in blood. They shouted, "buy a national assembly with our blood. National

③ *ibid*, pp. 70-75.

assembly! Blood! ③ Observing the state of hysteria in China, some Western observers referred to the provincial assemblies as “that hydra-headed monster, which the government must already be repenting it ever called into existence.” ④ The three petitions influenced the outbreak of the revolution and characterized the first sprouts of democracy in China.

IV

In this paper, we have briefly explored the development of political democracy in China and the constitutional preparation program of the late Qing dynasty. Taking China from theory to practice, the Constitutionalists broke the ground for democratic processes. Had there been no revolution to overthrow the Qing government, the autocratic enlightenment theory and the electoral programs launched by the Constitutionalists provided a foundation for a democratic process to evolve in China in a peaceful way. Their progressive strategy emphasized gradual learning by doing. Hu Shi, one of the leaders of the May Fourth Movement, once said during the 1930s, “a democratic system is a simple concept, simply put it into practice. Just like teaching people to swim, you must let them go into the water themselves. Talking about theory is useless.”

Hu Shi, heavily influenced by the democratic system of the United States, propagated the “democratic-kindergarten” (minzhiyouzhiguan, 民治幼稚園) theory, ⑤ which compared a democratic government to education. Just as a child must begin an education in kindergarten and gradually learn by practicing. So China must begin its path to democracy with the crude training programs of self-government institutes like the provincial and national assemblies. Like the Constitutionalists, he felt confident the system would improve with time and China would come to realize a mature democracy.

Given the historical developments of China after the outbreak of the revolution, it is difficult to evaluate the potential of the constitutional preparation program for democratic reform in China. It remains uncertain, for example, whether the national assembly could ever wield enough power

③ 順天時報（北京），宣統元年（1909）十二月二十六日；宣統二年（1910）九月七日；申報，宣統二年（1910）九月十四日。

④ *North China Herald*, Jan. 28, 1910. p. 183.

⑤ 胡適，「答丁在君先生論民主與獨裁」，獨立評論，No. 133 (1934/12/30).

to safeguard the rights of the people, or whether the gentry class could successfully advance the democratic process and avoid corruption until a day of greater political participation by the masses. In any case, no democratic reform is perceivable without the infrastructure of elections and assemblies which the Constitutionalists introduced. It seems fair to assume that with an operational system, sooner or later the interests of the people would not be ignored. As Joseph A. Schumpeter has written, the essence of a democratic system is to let people cast their ballot.^{③④} Of course, it must be conceded that the difficulties of realizing a democratic system in China were primarily rooted in the poor education and underdeveloped economic conditions of the people.^{③⑤} But with the improvement of these two conditions, democracy could be quite realizable as demonstrated by the Constitutionalists early successes. Dignified by the perspective of historical hindsight, the Constitutionalist emphasis for reform under peaceful conditions seems just and reasonable. Considering the chaos and devastation which China has experienced during the Republican years, and the pervading economic underdevelopment lingering today, the conservative program of the Constitutionalists may well have prevented the chaotic condition of the early years of the Republic which was the real cause for China's failure to realize the goal of a democratic system.

③④ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York, Harper, 1950) p. 269.

③⑤ Andrew J. Nathan, *Chinese Democracy*, p. 232.