

# PROVINCIAL ASSEMBLIES: THE EMERGENCE OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, 1909-1914\*

By

CHANG P'ENG-YUAN

## I

The idea of political participation was introduced into China early in the 1870s. Subsequently many of the intellectuals desired that China should adopt a parliamentary system. Cheng Kuan-ying 鄭觀應, Feng Kuei-fen 馮桂芬, Ho K'ai 何啟, T'ang Chen 湯震, for example, all mentioned in their works that the Chinese government should call a parliament in order that people could contribute their opinions in an effort to serve the nation which was reeling under the pressure of imperialism. The famous reformers, K'ang Yu-wei 康有為 and Liang Ch'i-ch'ao 梁啟超, urged the convocation of a national assembly to symbolize uniting the people to make the nation strong. These forerunners of parliamentary thinkers led the Chinese people to realize their right of political participation.

It was the Ch'ing government that first promised to let the Chinese people have their parliament. In 1907 a Constitutional Preparation Program was promulgated that aimed to establish a constitutional monarchy in order, it was hoped, to stave off the dynasty's final collapse. An important step of the Preparation Program was to establish both national and provincial assemblies on a provisional basis so the people could learn to practice articulating politics. Thus 21 provincial assemblies 諮議局 and a national assembly 資政院 were convened in 1909 and 1910 respectively. Those who were elected

---

\* Paper delivered at the 24th Annual Conference, the American Association of Chinese Studies, Baltimore, Maryland, U. S. A. (November, 6-7, 1982)

pretended they were formal representatives, proudly sitting in the assemblies. They spoke loudly their right of decision making. In spite of their posturing however, these provisional assemblies should be regarded as the first emergence of political participation in China.

But in 1911 before the Ch'ing court could realize its aim of constructing a constitutional monarchy, revolution broke out which overthrew the ancient regime and established the republic. The birth of the republic facilitated the formal establishment of national and provincial assemblies 省議會. It was a pity, however, that these assemblies did not last long enough to further the practice of political participation which was so important for a young republic. Yuan Shih-k'ai 袁世凱 dissolved these assemblies arbitrarily, and the system of political participation died early.

During the warlord period of 1916-1927, political conditions were unstable and deteriorating. Political participation stagnated. The assemblies, both central and provincial, were recalled and dissolved several times. There was little substantial accomplishment.<sup>(1)</sup>

This paper is focused on the provincial assemblies of late Ch'ing and the early republic. The central assemblies, which I have discussed elsewhere<sup>(2)</sup>, will not be discussed. Utilizing the concept of political participation, I am going to make a brief survey of the organization and institutions of these local assemblies. I will also discuss their operation. There are several topical questions that we shall ask: What were the proportional relations between the assembly members and the population? How were the elections carried out? Whom were

---

(1) The 1913 assemblies were recalled in 1916 and dissolved in the next year. There was a second election in 1918, but it was completely controlled by the An-fu Club which was notoriously corrupt. The third election in 1922 was also corruptly carried out. During the Federal Movement Years (1920-1926), Hunan was the only province that had an election. After the Northern Expedition, political trends changed completely under the Nationalists.

(2) See my article "Political Participation and Political Elites in Early Republican China: The Parliament of 1913-1914" *JAS.* XXXVII, No.2. (Feb. 1978). Translated by Andrew Nathan. Also "Constitutionalists", in Mary Wright, (ed). *China in Revolution* (Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 143-183.

elected? How were the members pronounced as the representatives of the people? It is my hope that the answers to these questions will reveal the nature of the early stage of political participation.

The comparative method will be employed extensively in this paper. We shall see that these assemblies had both similarities and differences from the points of view of both time and space. The comparative method sheds light on the political characteristics in China during the early 20th century.

## II

The two elections of provincial assemblies analyzed here took place in 1909 and 1912. Although the political background changed completely, the second was influenced by the first because they were only a few years apart. I will study the qualifications required of candidates and electorates. Who was qualified to vote and to be elected?

Table 1. Qualifications

Qualification	1909	1912
age of candidate	30	25
age of voter	25	21
education required	middle school and up	primary school and up
wealth	5,000 yuan	500 yuan
annual tax paid	—	2 yuan
official rank	rank 7, civil rank 5, military	—
experience in public affairs or school administration	3 years	—
civil examination degree	sheng-yuan and up	—

Table 1 shows the 1912 requirements were much lower than those of 1909. For the 1909 election, a candidate must be over the age of 30, a voter over 25. The 1912 election lowered the ages to 25 and 21 respectively. The late Ch'ing election was limited to those candidates and voters who were wealthy, while the republican election reduced the wealth qualification by 90%. Education requirements were lowered also. In a word, the requirements of the republican election were not so stringent. We should regard these changes as substantial improvement in terms of popular participation.

The regulations of these two elections listed many people who were disqualified to be either voter or candidate (see Table 2). Women did not have the right either to vote or to seek election. Traditionally, in China, even as in the West where they had no political rights until the 1920s, women generally had no overt role in the political process.

Table 2. Non-qualified Voters

	1909	1912
law breaking	1. bad social behavior 2. convicted criminals 3. engaged in disreputable business 4. under suspicion of business irregularities	— — — convicted criminals
addicts	opium user	opium user
sickness	the insane	the insane
education	the illiterate	the illiterate
family	family engaged in disreputable business	—
sex	women	women

In sum, the republican local assemblies improved somewhat to qualification; they were not as restricted as those of the late Ch'ing.

This improvement influenced the number of voters and candidates. According to sources available, those casting ballots for the 1912 provincial assemblies

increased 10 to 50 times. (see Table 3) The voters in 1909 were only 0.42% of the population, while in 1912 they were 9.72%. The latter is 23 times greater. Obviously, this is the result of liberalized qualifications; however the level of participation was still far behind the contemporary Western nations.

The voters among the 21 provinces differed greatly. In Shansi 山西 province, for example, where the population was 12,000,000, the number of voters came to 2,500,000, while Kiangsu 江蘇 province had 32,000,000 in population, but fewer than 2,000,000 voters. Kiangsu, in comparison with Shansi, was a rather rich province. How could it be that there the number of voters was so low?

Table 3. The Voters

Province	Population	1909	%	1912	%
Chihli 直隸	29,932,000	163,000	0.62	—	—
Fengtien 奉天	12,133,000	53,000	0.43	—	—
Kiren 吉林	5,580,000	15,000	0.27	—	—
Heilungkiang 黑龍江	2,029,000	5,000	0.23	—	—
Kiangsu 江蘇	32,283,000	162,000	0.50	1,969,000	6.09
Anhwei 安徽	16,229,000	78,000	0.48	1,451,063	6.09
Kiangsi 江西	23,987,000	—	—	—	—
Chekiang 浙江	21,440,000	90,070	0.42	—	—
Fukien 福建	15,849,000	50,000	0.39	1,283,472	7.9
Hupeh 湖北	25,590,000	113,000	0.38	2,014,075	8.2
Hunan 湖南	27,390,000	100,000	0.36	2,277,000	4.67
Shantung 山東	30,988,000	119,000	0.38	1,369,632	4.42
Honan 河南	35,900,000	—	—	—	—
Shansi 山西	12,269,000	54,000	0.43	2,548,052	20.76
Shensi 陝西	10,271,096	29,000	0.29	—	—
Kansu 甘肅	4,990,000	9,000	0.19	—	—
Szechwan 四川	48,130,000	191,000	0.39	—	—
Kwangtung 廣東	28,010,000	142,000	0.49	1,900,000	6.78
Kwangsi 廣西	8,747,000	40,000	0.46	2,762,000	31.57

Yunnan 雲南	9,467,000	—	—	233,398	2.46
Kweichow 貴州	9,665,000	42,000	0.42	752,250	7.78
Average			0.42		6.70

It is hard to believe that Yunnan 雲南, a province with some 10,000,000 population, had only some 230,000 voters. The General Secretary of the National Election Committee questioned the reported figures and demanded another investigation to be carried out. The provincial election committee replied by saying: "We know that the voters should not be so low in contrast to the population. The question is that communication is very difficult and the custom of the people is so conservative, both of which make the census incomplete."<sup>(3)</sup> This statement can be regarded as pointing out the general cause of negligence and incomplete investigation of qualified voters.

Elsewhere, however, contradictory and excessive statistics for number of voters were reported. The 2nd electoral district of Kiangsi 江西 province, for example, reported 1,300,000 voters, the numbers of other districts were only half or a third that number. Obviously, the 2nd district made a false report as the electoral general noted.<sup>(4)</sup> In Hunan 湖南 province the same case happened. One of its voting districts reported excessive numbers.<sup>(5)</sup> Both excessive and incomplete reports of voters were not the real problem. As far as is known there were few provinces that made authentic investigations. The figures reported were created arbitrarily. They knew that the more voters they had, the more representatives they could obtain. This was why they reported as many as they wished. Those who were timid and had no idea of sending representatives tried to report fewer voters. Thus we might say that there were improvements in the 1912 election, yet it had many shortcomings.

Now let us make an observation on the electoral process. Both the 1909

(3) *Government Gazette* 政府公報, telegram, 1/12/5, Vol. 8, p.587.

(4) *Ibid*, 1/11/10, Vol 7, p.582.

(5) *Government Gazette*, 2/1/14, Vol.9, p.280.

and 1912 elections adopted a double voting system which was probably brought in from Japan. A double voting system meant that the assemblies' members were elected through two ballots. The result of the first voting was to choose electors who then cast a second ballot to elect the fixed number of assembly members. In this system both direct and indirect voting rights of the people were exercised. Our attention should be directed to the first vote because it was the exercise of the direct voting rights of the citizens. The first vote of the 1909 election elected ten times the fixed number of assembly members, while the 1912 twenty times. The atmosphere of the preliminary ballot was apathetic. Few of the qualified citizens wanted to cast their ballots. The rate of voting was very low. In the city of Canton 廣州, for example, there were some 1,600 qualified voters, but only 399 (25%) cast their ballot. Again, in Fuchow 福州, Fukien, 40% of the qualified citizens in the city went to vote. Of those outside the city only 10% cast ballots. (6)

The results of the 1912 election were worse. In Kiangsu province, the ballot rate was 11.8%. (7) The voting rate of other provinces, though we lack complete statistical data, was hardly over 30%.

However prevalent voter apathy was on the one hand, candidate over-enthusiasm showed on the other. Many over-fervent candidates tried any means to get people to vote for them. A common method to get others' votes was bribery. In the 1909 election, people offered 40 to 200 taels to buy a vote. (8) In the 1912 election, the price of ballots varied. In Chekiang \$50 was offered for a ballot; (9) in Fukien, it increased to \$300. (10) In Hupeh, the going rate was \$5 per vote for the primary election and \$50 to \$200 in

---

(6) Chang P'eng-yuan, *Constitutionalists and the Revolution of 1911 in China* 立憲派與辛亥革命, p. 18.

(7) Wang Shu-hwai, "The Kiangsu Provincial Assembly, 1908-1914 清末民初江蘇省的諮議局與省議會", *History Bulletin*, National Taiwan Normal University, No. 6, p. 325.

(8) Chang P'eng-yuan, *Constitutionalists and Revolution*, pp. 18-19.

(9) *Ming-li Pao* 民立報, 1/12/24, 1/12/25.

(10) *Ming-li Pao*, 1/12/28.

the second balloting. <sup>(11)</sup>

In addition to bribery, there were other forms of corruption. The 1909 election in Hwaining 懷寧, Anhwei Province, was notoriously corrupt. People knew certain persons were assured of victory before the ballots were counted. It was common for one person to cast his ballot repeatedly a hundred or a thousand times. <sup>(12)</sup>

Conditions worsened in the 1912 election in Kiangsu and Chekiang. Many people could not get to vote because their ballots were taken by someone else. Some ballots were seized by force. <sup>(13)</sup> In Hunan province, 40,000 ballots were falsely printed. Many ballots were signed in one man's handwriting. The total number of ballots was much higher than the eligible population in a hsien. <sup>(14)</sup>

The most serious problem was official control of balloting. There was a charge that "some people got elected by virtue of their relationship with officials, who interfered in the election." <sup>(15)</sup> In a number of provinces, the balloting was only nominal, because the assembly members were appointed or chosen by officials. <sup>(16)</sup>

These accounts give a bad impression of the elections. But comparatively speaking, the election of 1909 was better carried out than that of 1912. A member of both these two assemblies made comparative comments in his memoir by saying that corruption in 1909 election was not as bad as in the later elections. He observed that "the candidates were mostly gentlemanly, modest and agreeable. But those of the republican period subverted one another from envy and jealousy; their bribery was open and shameless." <sup>(17)</sup>

---

(11) Su Yun-feng, "A History of Hupeh Provincial Assembly, 1909—1926. 湖北省諮議局與省議會", *Bulletin*, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, No. 7, p. 470.

(12) Chang p'eng-yuan, *Constitutionalists and Revolution*, p. 19.

(13) *Ming-li Pao*, 1/12/16, 1/12/11; *Shih Pao* 時報, 1/12/9, 1/12/14; *Shun-t'ien Shih-pao* 順天時報, 1/12/1, 1/12/2; Wang Shu-hwai, "Kiangsu Provincial Assembly", p. 326.

(14) *Government Gazette*, telegram, 2/1/23, 2/2/6.

(15) *Ibid.*, 2/1/29.

(16) There were numerous reports of official control by the *Shih-pao* and *Ming-li pao*.

(17) *Memoir of Chung po-yee* 鍾伯毅先生訪問記錄, Manuscript collection of Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, pp. 21-22.



In addition to the above comments, some witnesses gave favorable criticism to the 1909 election. A report by the *North China Herald* says that the Shansi Assembly was well organized; its election had few defects.<sup>(18)</sup> Iichi Saburo 井一三郎, a Japanese witness, remarked concerning standards among the assemblies, "Kiangsu numbered first, Chekiang second and Honan third," and Hupeh, Chihli, Hunan, Anhwei, Kiangsi, Shantung were among the better ones.<sup>(19)</sup> I have not seen any favorable criticism of the 1912 election.

In conclusion, we have to recognize that both the 1909 and 1912 elections had a number of difficulties which were not easy to overcome. One of the causes of apathy was that most the voters did not know what the election meant. In the modern world each citizen's ballot is regarded as his sacred right. But few of the voters in early 20th century China had this idea. When a government official came to investigate whether a person had the right to vote, he was afraid to answer the questions posed to him. Those questions about property were very annoying and caused suspicion.<sup>(20)</sup>

There also were technical problems difficult to overcome at that time. A balloting station, for example, could be too far away to reach because of lack of transportation facilities. A report says that the voters of Yung-Tsun 永遵 in Chihli province had to walk some 500 li (250 km) to P'ing-chuan 平泉 to cast their ballots. It was winter time, and few people wanted to travel such a long distance to cast a ballot that they did not understand at all.<sup>(21)</sup>

There were people with misconceptions about the elections. A sarcastic writer pointed out that to become a member of the provincial assembly was the same as to obtain some post of the bureaucracy.<sup>(22)</sup> This misconception led many people to try to qualify themselves as candidates and to be elected.<sup>(23)</sup>

---

(18) *North China Herald*, Oct. 30, 1909, p. 250; Feb. 18, 1910, p. 359.

(19) *Foreign Affairs Papers of Japan*, M. T. 1. 6/1/37.

(20) Chang P'eng-yuan, *Constitutionists and Revolution*, p. 15.

(21) *Government Gazette*, V. 7, p. 564.

(22) *Monthly Novel* 月月小說, No. 10, 1909.

(23) *Government Gazette*, Telegrams, V. 7. p. 595.

This was why the corruption and bribery that left such a bad impression occurred.

### III

If we are surprised that corruption and bribery were so serious in these two elections, then we have to realize that such defects were inevitable even in Western countries where democratic electoral systems were devised. Bribery is a common phenomenon everywhere in this world. It seems that sometimes bribery must be tolerated in order to avoid violence.<sup>(24)</sup> Bribery is a kind of secret "transaction". It is not as horrible as violence that might upset social order. There is a theory that corruption could be eliminated gradually by planned education and socialization. The government of a developing country often plays the role of tutor in order to teach their people how to become citizens. The danger is that a dictator may seize power under the pretext of political tutelage.

This point leads me to accept the idea that the nine year Constitutional Preparation Program promulgated by the Ch'ing government was a necessary process leading toward constitutional monarchy. Here I will briefly discuss another part of the process, the local self-government program, so we may comprehend how elections were afterwards influenced by it.

According to a regulation issued by the Ch'ing government in 1910, the so-called self-government was meant to allow the people who were living in towns and villages to establish district councils and civil affair trustee committees so that they could manage their public affairs such as elections, schooling, public health, road construction, economic development, and finance, by themselves.

The basic level of organization was divided into two categories: the town-village councils 城鎮鄉議事會 and the magistrate district (hsien) councils 州

---

(24) James Scott, *Comparative Political Corruption* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1972), pp. 88-106.

縣議事會。 A town with more than a population of 50,000 would establish a council of twenty members. The membership increased according to the increase of population. But the upper limit was thirty members. The smallest village with a population of 2,500 had a council of six members; the largest with a population of 40,000 had sixteen. A district with a population of 200,000 could establish a council with twenty members. The largest district with a population of 600,000 had sixty (see Table 4).

Table 4. Town and District Councils and Trustees

District Councils

Population	Members	Trustees
200,000	20	4
210,000	21	—
220,000	22	—
230,000	23	—
⋮	⋮	
300,000	30	6
⋮	⋮	
400,000	40	8
⋮	⋮	
600,000	60	12

Town-Village Councils

Town

Population	Members	Manager General	Managers	Honorary Managers
50,000	20	1	1-3	4-6
55,000	21	1	1-3	4-6
60,000	22	1	1-3	4-6
70,000	24	1	1-3	4-6
80,000	26	1	1-3	4-6
90,000	28	1	1-3	4-6
100,000	30	1	1-3	4-6

Village				
2,500	6	—	—	—
5,000	8	—	—	—
10,000	10	—	—	—
30,000	14	—	—	—
40,000	16	—	—	—

The regulations were copied from the West. The question was how to put them into practice. In late Ch'ing China, there were few people who knew how to organize a self-government. The only way was to train people. So the Ch'ing government ordered every province to start the training of personnel who were to establish self-government in their local districts.

Each province was to establish an institute for self-government 自治研究所 in the provincial capital which was responsible for training specialists. Those who received training should return to their own *hsien* where another institute of self-government was to be established.

The curricula of the institutes of self-government were mostly political science, economics and the history of self-government of the West. The most important thing was to train people to manage elections so they had to know the techniques of population census and the investigation of voters and candidates. They studied the regulations of self-government of other countries. From the contents of curricula, it seems there was a good start.

Students were mostly from the gentry class who later got themselves elected as members of the assemblies. In Kiangsu province, for example, there were more than twenty institutes established.<sup>(25)</sup> Several of these in Suchow 蘇州 and Kiangnin 江寧 were well managed, according to reports. Because Shanghai 上海, one of the earliest treaty ports in China, started self-government in 1905, it became a model for the rest of the province. Leaders in other

(25) Wang Shu-hwai, "Kiangsu Provincial Assembly," p.314.

areas merely followed Shanghai as their model.<sup>(26)</sup> In Shantung, a large institute was established in 1909 where 300 students were admitted. After their graduation at the end of that year, they returned to their districts and started local institutes. In 1910 there were 4,539 students trained and graduated.<sup>(27)</sup> In Hunan, an institute was established in the provincial capital with 217 students. Later, another class of 200 was admitted. They all returned to their own local districts and in turn started their own institutes. Down to March, 1911, a total of 2,819 students graduated.<sup>(28)</sup> Hupeh province had 346 graduates in its first class. Later the number increased to several thousand.<sup>(29)</sup> Our data for the rest of the provinces are not complete. But from the above, we can see that institutes of self-government were established in each province. The graduates from these short-term institutes became the leaders of self-government.

Local self-governments in action were run by these new graduates. According to a report given in May, 1911, there were 1,843 town and village councils, 847 city councils, 447 town councils, 549 village councils and 34 district councils established (see Table 5). This report tells us the establishment of city-town councils was not so difficult as that of district councils. But, only a few village councils received attention from local leaders.

In concluding, we must say that local self-government accomplished little. However, it was a start. The establishment of these local organizations came one year after the 1909 provincial assemblies, which were not subject to influence from these basic structures. But they did have an impact on the republican elections. Although the 1912 election was no better than that of 1909, a basic foundation for political participation was laid by these local self-governments.

---

(26) Sheng Hwai-yu, "Self-government in China," *Bulletin*, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, No. 9, pp. 299-305.

(27) Chang Yu-fa, *Modernization in Shantung* 中國現代化的區域研究：山東省, Taipei, 1982, p. 281.

(28) Chang P'eng-yuan, "Hunan Provincial Assembly 近代地方政治參與的萌芽——湖南省舉例," *History Bulletin*, National Taiwan Normal University, No. 4, p. 397.

(29) Su Yun-feng, *Modernization in Hupei*. 中國現代化的區域研究：湖北省, Taipei, 1981, p. 282.

Table 5. District, City, Town, and Village Councils

	District Council	City Council	Town Council	Village Council	Total
Szechwan	5	105	177	—	287
Shantung	1	107	3	—	111
Hupoh	—	69	15	24	103
Kiangsu	10	37	210	—	257
Kiangsi	—	81	4	25	109
Anhwei	—	60	—	—	60
Fukien	1	58	—	—	59
Shansi	1	80	—	—	81
Honan	1	31	6	19	57
Chekiang	—	41	6	391	448
Kweichow	—	81	—	—	81
Chihli	13	29	—	91	153
Kwangtung	1	9	26	—	36
Fengtien	—	24	—	—	24
Shensi	1	25	—	—	25
Heilungkiang	—	10	—	—	10
Total	34	847	447	549	1,843

Sources: Government Gazette, 1911/5/3, pp. 8-9.

#### IV

We may now turn to the question of who was elected. The 1909 election regulations give us an indication that three kinds of people would easily be elected: those who had a traditional civil examination degree; those who received a new style education; and those who were comparatively wealthy. This came from the Chinese society in transition.

Down to 1905, as a result of the traditional examination system Chinese society could be divided into two social levels: the gentry and the commoners.<sup>(30)</sup>

(30) See Chung-li Chang, *The Chinese Gentry* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1955); Ping-ti Ho, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China* (N. Y.: Columbia University Press, 1962).

The proportion of the gentry was small, only 2% of the population. Although small in number, they were powerful and influential. The commoners, the other 98%, followed the direction of the gentry. There were many defects in the civil examination system which had lasted for more than 1,200 years, and it was finally abolished in 1905. The abolition of the civil examination system changed the structure of the Chinese society; the gentry class, no longer able to extend into the next generation, would be extinguished as the last generation died. But the 1909 election was only four years after the examinations were abolished, and the gentry class still remained a strong group. Many of the gentry would be elected as assembly members. My study of the Constitutionalists showed an overwhelming majority, 90% of those elected in the 1909 election, were gentry.<sup>(31)</sup>

The 1912 election was still not far removed from 1905. Although China had changed its political system from monarchy to republic, the gentry class remained. We still find their traces in the provincial assemblies. But we are not able to reconstruct the complete picture of them, because of the scarcity of sources. Su Yun-feng studied the Hupeh assembly and found 37 among the 104 members with background information; 19 of them (51%) had traditional degrees.<sup>(32)</sup> My study of the national assemblies which were elected at the same time shows a similar make-up. Among the members, 50% were degree holders<sup>(33)</sup> which is nearly identical to Su's sample. So I venture to conclude that about half of the membership in the 1912 provincial assemblies were still degree holders, although the percentage dropped slightly in comparison with the 1909 election.

Those who received the new-style education became more and more

---

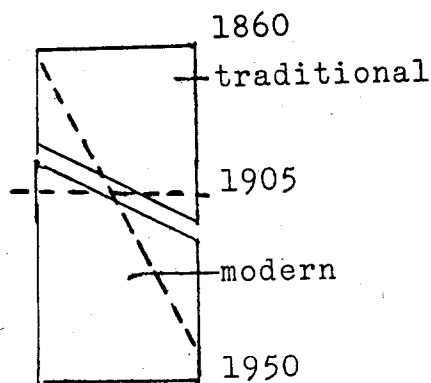
(31) "Constitutionalists", in Mary Wright, ed. *China in Revolution: The First Phase, 1900—1913* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 151-153; Chang P'eng-yuan, *Constitutionalists and Revolution*, p.27

(32) Su Yun-feng, "Hupeh Provincial Assembly", pp.440-441.

(33) Chang P'eng-yuan, "Political Participation", pp. 293-313, For the Chinese version see *History Bulletin*, National Taiwan Normal University, No.7

influential. Western education was introduced into China formally in the very beginning of this century. More students went to study in Western countries and Japan. Some of the gentry class tried to re-educate themselves in Western style schools. Most of those who were elected had received both traditional and modern education. Su Yun-feng found that in Hupeh province 21 (56%) of the members on whom we have background information had been educated in new-styled schools. My study of the central assemblies shows some 70% with new education background, the difference is relatively small.

The study of the background of the assembly members shows that the structure of the Chinese elite changed. New elements appeared among the 1909 assembly members and then became a strong force in 1912. This change revealed the gentry class declining, and the newly educated growing. The transition from the new to the old can be illustrated by the chart on the following. The upper bar represents the trend of the traditional culture; the lower bar represents the coming of the modern culture. We used to say that 1905 can be treated as a demarcation between Chinese traditional and modern cultures. But



as a matter of fact, the Chinese traditional culture, on one hand, extended beyond 1905, though its force weakened; modernity, on the other, emerged long ago before 1905, and its force became gradually stronger. Nevertheless,



the traditional did not wholly disappear, and modernity did not totally conquer; the two joined each other, interweaving and influencing each other.

A third feature of the members was their wealthy family background. Some of the members registered \$5,000 as their property qualification. It is common sense to assume that most the gentry class came from wealthy families. Marxist historians used to label the 1911 revolution as a bourgeois revolution. But the rich do not want revolution. They prefer gradual reform instead of radical change.

The average age of the members was around forty. The 1909 group was older (41) than the 1912 (35).<sup>(34)</sup> During an epoch of revolution, those who came to power are mostly young.

The above is my investigation of the background of the members of late Ch'ing and early republican provincial assemblies. My interpretation of this data is that those who belonged to the gentry class were comparatively conservative. China's traditional elite, however, was open to everybody who could struggle up the ladders of social position. But to master the Confucian classics was not an easy thing. One had to study more than ten years before winning a higher degree in the civil service examinations. Once a candidate passed the higher examinations, he was qualified to enter the government as an official. He naturally became a leader in his native town. The most important motivation for obtaining a higher degree was to become a privileged person, respected by every one of his society and enjoying a certain kind of social and political power. A man who enjoyed such a position in society, would prefer a peaceful and stable social life. He would fear radical and abrupt social change. This is why he was conservative.

But those with a new style education became progressive. Those who came back from abroad knew the difference between China and Western countries;

---

(34) For the 1909 group see Chang P'eng-yuan, *Constitutionalists and Revolution*, p. 34; I do not have the age of the 1912 group, but my article on the Central Assembly estimates an average age of 35, see Chang P'eng-yuan, "Political Participation."

China was backward, the West progressive. They wanted China to be wealthy and strong. Now they were elected members of their native assembly and had the desire to change their society.

Thus, apparently, the characteristics of the assembly members were contradictory. On the one hand they were conservative, because they were of the gentry class; on the other hand, their new education made them progressive. As a result they behaved sometimes as conservatives, sometimes as progressives, depending on the situation they faced. When they encountered circumstances that affected their interests, they were conservative. On the other hand they could switch to progressive attitudes when they had the will to make their country strong. Their situation made them half conservative and half progressive. They might be more conservative and less progressive. Or it might be just the other way around. I shall demonstrate this in the following discussion.

Before going into the attitudes and actions of the assembly members, we should take a look at their party and faction affiliations. Modern party ideas came into China in the late Ch'ing. The intellectuals divided themselves, roughly speaking, into two groups: the Revolutionaries and the Constitution-  
alists. The Revolutionaries tried to use radical methods to reconstruct China while the Constitution-  
alists preferred peaceful reform. Most the Constitution-  
alists campaigned for election to the 1909 assemblies. A few of the Revolution-  
aries became assembly members at that time; their activities were mainly clandestine, however.

Among the Constitution-  
alists there were factions. As we have observed, these people differed among themselves because of their conservative and progressive characteristics. Factionalism prevailed. In the Shantung and Kwei-  
chow provincial assemblies of 1909, for example, factionalism was the norm. Shantung had a "faction of sixty-two" which was an affiliation of 62 mem-  
bers who were conservatives. Those who came back from studying in Japan

did not like them. They organized themselves and had conflicts with the "faction of sixty-two."<sup>(35)</sup>

The Kweichow factions were notorious. Older members who held higher traditional degrees joined together to form the Constitutional Preparation Society. They were conservatives, comparatively speaking. The younger members, some of them returned from abroad, organized the Self-government Society. They were more progressive than the older members. These two groups were in sharp conflict on the control of local finance, education and other interests.<sup>(36)</sup>

The factions among the members of 1912 assemblies were more complicated. The two parties in late Ch'ing now reorganized themselves after the establishment of the republic. The Revolutionaries formed the Nationalist Party 國民黨. The Constitutionals became the Democratic Party 民主黨 and the Republican Party 共和黨, both of which reorganized and joined together as Progressive Party 進步黨. This gave the system a two-party form. The emergence of a two-party form led people to an optimistic view of republican politics. But when we go into the substance of these parties, we find their original characteristics had been already lost.

The reason was that the Nationalists absorbed conservative elements into their party. They asked the gentry to join the party in order to compete for seats in the assemblies. The gentry element in both the Nationalists and the Progressives were almost the same, 50% and 51% respectively.<sup>(37)</sup>

The competition between these two parties in the 1912 election was fervent. But there was little difference between the ideas of the two. The Progressives did not have a clear ideology. The Nationalists shelved Sun Yat-sen's doctrine of equal land distribution. What they did compete for was power. The party close to the government became conservative, while the party out of power

---

(35) Chang P'eng-yuan, *Constitutionalists and Revolution*, pp.176-177.

(36) Chang P'eng-yuan, *Constitutionalists and Revolution*, p.182.

(37) Chang P'eng-yuan, "Political Participation," pp.310-313.

raised radical slogans. It has been stated that parties of early republican China were loosely organized.<sup>(38)</sup> In the case of the provincial assembly groups this was true.

## V

I have discussed the background of the assembly members. From this, we can discern some aspects of Chinese political elites during the early 20th century. They were of the gentry class, the newly educated and the better off. The articulation of politics would be monopolized by them. The bourgeoisie was too young to compete. The working class was yet to be wakened.

As the elites of their society, the assembly members were concerned with their own interests as well as the prosperity of the nation. The traditional gentry used to say: "We gentry are responsible for the success or failure of our country." They were quite confident about being the pillars of state. They longed for political participation, and parliamentarism encouraged them to realize their goal. Now although only local representatives, they could say whatever they pleased without reservation.

The speeches by the assembly members were impressive. Chang Jen-chün 張人駿, governor-general of Liang-Kiang, a conservative who did not like the representative system, was overwhelmed by the dignified behavior of the representatives the first day he joined the opening session of the Kiangsu assembly. Later he made a favorable comment saying: "Most of them understand the difficulties of the present situation... They talked elegantly."<sup>(39)</sup> A North China Herald reporter described the manners of the members of Shansi provincial assembly as peaceful and mild. They were pleasant and that gave people a good impression. "They are intelligent and well-educated."<sup>(40)</sup>

Their discussions and talks were substantial. In the first yearly session,

---

(38) Andrew Nathan, *Peking Politics, 1918-1923* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 221-224.

(39) *Government Gazette*, 1909/9/21.

(40) NCH, 1909, Oct. 30. p. 25; 1910, Feb. 18. p. 359.

for example, the Kiangsu assembly passed 184 bills and proposals, of which 118 (64.1%) were financial and economic, 28 (15.2%) political and 35 (19%) social.<sup>(41)</sup> In the Hunan assembly, 36 bills were passed; 13 (36%) financial and economic, 11 (30%) social, and 6 (17%) political.<sup>(42)</sup> There were debates and furious exchanges of ideas. Most concerned economic development. They knew that China was poor and argued that the government should help the people to have a better standard of living. With the idea of safeguarding the people's purse, they tried every effort to stop tax increases.

Let us examine a few cases with which the local legislatures dealt. The salt price increase case of Yunnan is a good example. Traditionally the selling of salt was a monopoly of the government. In 1909, the government of Yunnan raised the price of salt in order to obtain more revenue. But before this was put into effect, the governor-general failed to notify the provincial assembly. The members were very angry and demanded that the government should give a proper explanation to the assembly members. They complained that "if the price increase was the right of the government, they would have no right to say anything; but since the regulations of the provincial assembly stated that cases relating to finance should be discussed by the members, the government had slighted the position of the assembly and trampled on their rights. The person responsible should be impeached." The case was sent to the Central Assembly and led to the impeachment of the high officials who signed the bill to raise the price of salt.<sup>(43)</sup>

Another case in Hunan is also worth our attention. The Hunan government had a very tight budget during the years of Constitutional Preparation because many of the new projects needed money. The governor of the province initiated a sale of local bonds, hoping that the financial difficulties could be solved temporarily. The governor seemed to be unaware that bond issues should be

---

(41) Wang Shu-hwei, "Kiangsu Provincial Assembly," p. 316.

(42) Chang P'eng-yuan, "Hunan Provincial Assembly," pp. 9-10.

(43) *Tung-fang tsa-chih*, Vol. 9, No. 7, pp. 23-24.

approved by the provincial assembly. The bonds were put on the market after a regular memorial to the throne but without consulting the local legislators. The members of the provincial assembly were furious. They denounced the administrators and sent the case to the central assembly where members turned their anger on the princes who held central power. There were repeated memorials of impeachment which seemed to put the Ch'ing government in a very embarrassing position. (44)

The members not only safeguarded the purse of the people, they paid close attention to political and social problems. What interested them most was the development of education. They demanded that more money should be spent for schooling. They talked about the problems of social security. The Kwangsi provincial assembly demanded that their police training school should train more of their own policemen and not admit students from other province. This became a hot issue which the members debated with government officials. (45)

The pronouncements of the second year (1910) were more meaningful. Many of the members demanded that their respective provincial governments should work out plans to push ahead industrial development. The Hunan provincial assembly suggested that in Changsha 長沙, the capital, a mill should be constructed as a model that other districts of the province could imitate. There should be industrial and commercial exhibitions from time to time in order to enhance industrialization. (46) The Hupeh provincial assembly asked their government to spend more money to enlarge the market area of Hankow 漢口, which was becoming the largest city in central China. (47)

A theme that absorbed the attention of all the provincial assembly members was the concept that tax revenue should be divided between central and

---

(44) *Kuo-feng Pao*, No. 32, p. 90.

(45) *Tung-fang Tsa-chih*, Vol. 9, No. 7, pp. 23-24.

(46) *Government Gazette*, 1911/6/5.

(47) Su Yun-feng, "Hupeh Provincial Assembly," p. 429.

provincial authorities. Traditionally and theoretically, all tax revenue belonged to the central government. Any local government which needed money first had to memorialize the throne. But modern ideas inspired the legislators to argue that tax revenues should be divided. There were debates among the members on how they should be divided.<sup>(48)</sup> This became one of the central themes in later years in the assemblies because the division of tax revenues was not realized until the Nationalist period in the 1930s.

The review and discussion of government budgets was another interesting theme. Since the beginning of Constitutional Preparation, every province faced a difficult problem in that their expenditures increased greatly and rapidly because of new measures of political construction. To solve the problem, the Ch'ing government asked all provinces to make an investigation of finance, to seek out possible revenue sources and to put modern-style budgets into practice. Since the regulations of the provincial assemblies bestowed the right of watching the purse on the members, they naturally would interfere with the budget process. In 1910 the budget was first put into practice. It was stated that provincial governments needed only to submit records of expenditures to their respective assemblies in the first year since this was the first attempt at such a policy. But many of the members were not aware of such a statement and demanded both expenditures and revenues should be submitted for investigation. They came in conflict with their government officials. For example, the members quarrelled with the governor-general of Kiangsu.<sup>(49)</sup> The Fukien assembly members were very angry that their government did not submit its budget in time. They called off all sessions until it was received.<sup>(50)</sup> This issue showed that all provincial members had a positive desire to participate in government.

The most impressive thing was the petition for early convening of

---

(48) *Shih-Pao*, 1911/6/5.

(49) Wang Shu-hwai, "Kiangsu Assembly," p. 321.

(50) *Tung-fang tsa-chih*, Vol. 7, No. 11 (1910/2/11).

parliament. I have treated this in an earlier article, "The Constitutionals",<sup>(51)</sup> and will not go into it again here. What I want to repeat is that the assembly members, most of them constitutionalists, saw China encroached upon by the powers and hoped their government would call a national assembly to gather together the strength of the people and prevent the nation from being dismembered. Their three petitions, one after another, gathered hundreds and thousands of people to demonstrate and appeal. The Ch'ing government, although hating such "noise and annoyance," was forced to reduce the period of Constitutional Preparation by three years. But revolution broke out before preparation was completed. We may pose a hypothetical question: had an early parliament had been called, might the revolution of 1911 have been avoided? Regardless of our conclusion on this point, it is significant that the petition itself was the first time the Chinese people directly exercised their will to participate in the political process.

Peace is one of the requirements for the practice of parliamentary politics, as we can understand. In a peaceful environment, the speakers could deliberate calmly and speak rationally. The assemblies of the early republic, however, did not enjoy such ideal conditions because of the chaotic situation. The young republic was very weak.

When Sung Chiao-jen 宋教仁 was murdered in March 22, 1913, the stability of the republic was shaken. The atmosphere of most provincial assemblies could not be calmed. Provinces such as Chekiang, Fukien, Kwangtung, Hunan, and Kiangsu were under the influence of radical elements among the Nationalists, who stirred the tide of revolution again. The assemblies did not spend much of their time discussing bills and proposals. They talked arrogantly and tried to participate in national affairs. The Nationalist members moved secretly to stop Yuan Shih-k'ai's 袁世凱 election as president of the republic. Before the election of the president, they demanded the promulgation of the constitution which they thought would damage Yuan's chances. Most of the

---

(51) See Mary Wright, ed., *China in Revolution*.



provincial assemblies responded in support of the idea of postponing the presidential election. They would participate in electing the president of the republic after the constitution was promulgated. Their speeches were very emotional.

Sung Chiao-jen's case became an issue against Yuan Shih-k'ai. Some of the provincial assemblies, such as those of Kiangsi, Hunan and Kwangtung sent telegrams nation-wide denouncing the government of Yuan Shih-k'ai, who at that time was only provisional president. They opposed the international loans which Yuan's government needed badly. Now these provincial assemblies seemed to have no interest in looking into their own local affairs.

Several provincial assemblies, however, were very cautious about expressing their opinions on national affairs. The northern provincial assemblies did not involve themselves in the tide against Yuan Shih-k'ai, but neither did they pay much attention to their local affairs. Some assemblies spend most of their time in power struggles. The assemblymen of Hupeh province, for example, had a sharp conflict with their civil governor Hsia Shou-k'ang 夏壽康 who wanted to cut back the salaries of the assembly members because of financial difficulties. This turned into a factional conflict. Much of the yearly session was wasted. There were 117 bills and proposals to be deliberated but only 42 (36%) completed the process of deliberation.<sup>(52)</sup>

The conflict in Kiangsu provincial assembly was more serious. Hsu Ting-lin 許鼎霖, a notorious member of the gentry, was elected as the chairman of the assembly before his relations with the monarchical restoration society were discovered. The republicans intended to get rid of him. Hsu had a very obstinate personality; he did not give in until the period of the yearly session was almost over.

Because the "noisy quarrelling" of the assemblies was distasteful to Yuan Shih-k'ai, he decided to dissolve all of them after he was elected formally as president of the republic. On July 10, 1913, he ordered the confiscation of

---

(52) Su Yun-feng. "Hupeh Provincial Assembly," pp. 443-4.

the membership lists of the nationalists in the Central Assembly; on August 20, the provincial assemblies of Kiangsi, Hunan, and Kwangtung were ordered disbanded. Now the Chinese people were destined to see their young representative system eliminated. On February 28, 1914, Yuan formally sent down his order to dissolve all assemblies.

## VI

In summary, this paper briefly discusses the provincial assemblies: their organization, election, the background of the members, and their deliberations and pronouncements. We can see that the process of political participation as it emerged in its very early stage at the beginning of the 20th century had many difficulties to overcome. But we have to agree that the gentry class in the late Ch'ing who were imbued with Confucian teachings did qualify themselves quite well to be the representatives of the people. In order to reeducate themselves, many of them turned to study in modern schools, either domestic or foreign, in the transitional period. They made a good impression on people when they became assembly members in late Ch'ing. Unfortunately they expressed themselves differently in the early period of the republic when the chaotic situation affected them emotionally. Earlier, however, these people were confident that they had the ability to represent their people. Sitting in the assembly chambers they were polite and behaved with propriety. Their deliberations give us the impression that they were rational. Their pronouncements show they realized China's needs.

Peace is important for a representative system to grow; stability helps the system work. The provincial assemblies in the late Ch'ing operated quite well. In contrast, in the early republic these assemblymen were quick to lose their temper. They seemed unable to remain calm when they were deliberating. This must be attributed to the completely changed political conditions after the 1911 revolution.

The system of political participation emerged in China but survived a very

short time. Yuan Shih-k'ai smashed the young system because he feared the representatives as an obstacle to his plans to restore monarchy. In any nation under the rule of a strong man, the system of deliberation seldom grows. Democracy in China had a long way to go.

## 「省議會：政治參與的興起，1909-1914」

### 中文提要

張朋園

諮議局和省議會是中國最早的地方議會，一在清朝末年(1909-1911)的帝制時代，一在民國初年(1913-1914)的共和時代。諮議局是清廷預備立憲的產物，人民藉之練習議政。辛亥革命推翻滿清，正式設立議會，中央有國會，地方有省議會。這兩次地方議會的召集，都是經過正式選舉而產生的，議員們且有引人入勝的議論，可以稱為中國政治參與的開始。由於兩者的「生命」都很短暫，沒有發揮預期的效果，比之西方的議會，不過萌芽階段的性質而已。本文討論這兩項議會的選舉，議員的出身背景，黨派關係，他們在議場中的議論，……用政治參與的觀念來看，可以反映中國清末民初過度時代的政治特色，蛻變中優秀分子的所思所志。中國政治參與之所以不能一往直前，社會的動盪不安蓋有關係。

