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Alexis de Tocqueville and Three Revolutions: France (1789–), Japan (1867–), China (1911–)

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This essay is an attempt to think through the three revolutions, using Tocqueville's theory of "democracy" as a key. For Tocqueville, democracy is a society with "the equality of conditions" – in other words, a society that has no hereditary status system. In this sense, Chinese society since the Song Dynasty has been "democracy" as Tocqueville himself pointed out repeatedly. In his understanding, contemporary China was a "democratic society" and its form of government was highly centralized "despotism"; in sum, it was "democratic despotism." Tocqueville was warning against the possible *Sinification* of America and Europe. Moreover, he thinks what the French Revolution brought about were mainly "the equality of conditions" and the establishment of centralized state power. The Meiji Revolution also realized these two things because it had not been "democratic" and the polity had been federal. On the other hand, in China, both had been actualized since the tenth century. Therefore, the Chinese Revolution which ended up with the establishment of the communist rule is very different from the other two revolutions.

Keywords: Tocqueville; democracy; revolution; China; France; Japan

Introduction

As is widely known, François Furet's *Interpreting the French Revolution* (1978; English translation, Cambridge University Press, 1981) delivered a shock to many people who until then had interpreted the French Revolution in a Marxist framework. Furet's work called forth a significant response, not just in Europe and the United States, but in Japan as well.² Until Furet's intervention, the following premises were implicitly shared, in various debates, by all "disputants" alike: The social category of "class" is basically determined by position within the economic structure; and in the French case, the opposing interests between those "classes," having intensified, erupted into politics: This was the Revolution. But Furet entirely denied these premises. Rejected by him, too, was the understanding, hitherto taken by all as a matter of course, that "the French Revolution was basically a bourgeois revolution." This denial would invalidate the question as to whether or not the "Meiji Restoration" (or, as I have proposed to call it, the "Meiji Revolution") was "in substance" (?) the same as the French Revolution, viz., a "bourgeois revolution." To Furet's way of thinking, a revolution, more than anything

This is a translation of Hiroshi Watanabe, "Arekushi do Tokuviru to Mittsu no Kakumei: Furansu (1789–), Nihon (1867–), Chugoku (1911–)," in *Furansu Kakumei to Meiji Ishin*, eds. Nobutaka Miura and Norihiko Fukui (Hakusuisha: Tokyo, 2018). The translator, Linus Recht, is currently a PhD student in political theory at the University of Notre Dame. His own writing has appeared in *The Psychoanalytic Review* (2017) and in *Critical Historical Studies* (forthcoming, 2020).

¹I would like to thank the Tocqueville Center at the University of Notre Dame for a grant received toward completing this translation. – Tr.

²Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 1–11. Patrice Gueniffey, *Histoire de la Révolution et de l'Empire* (Paris : Les Éditions Perrin, 2003), p. 15. Matsuura Yoshihiro, "Furansu Kakumei-shi Kenkyū no Genjō," in *Furansu Kakumei-shi no Genzai*, eds. Yamazaki Kōichi and Matsuura Yoshiro (Yamakawa Shuppan-sha, 2013), pp. 14–16.

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else, is a political problem; therefore, it must first of all be understood specifically *as* a political problem.

In the same book, in place of Marx, Furet employs the analysis of Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1858), specifically the interpretation of the Revolution shown in his *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (*L'Ancien régime et la Révolution*, 1856).

In this essay, however, I take my hints, not from *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, but rather from another great work of Tocqueville's, his *Democracy in America* (*De la Démocratie en Amérique*, Vol. I, 1835; Vol. II, 1840). In short, this essay is an experimental attempt to try to think through three revolutions that took place in France, Japan, and China, using Tocqueville's theory of "democracy" as a key.³

"A Democratic People Subject to a King"

As any careful reader of *Democracy in America* knows, Tocqueville's antonym for "democracy" (*démocratie*) is not "monarchy" (*monarchie*); neither is it "despotism" (*despotisme*). Rather, it is "aristocracy" (*aristocratie*). The reason for this is clear. In Tocqueville, "democracy" is basically not, as in Aristotle, rule by the many who are poor;⁴ neither is it the self-rule of the "people" (self-government); and neither is it parliamentary government based in free elections. Rather, for Tocqueville, democracy is the equality of conditions (*l'égalité des conditions*) – in other words, a society characterized by the dominance of circumstances or conditions which are equal for all. At the head of the Introduction to the first volume, Tocqueville writes as follows:

Among the new objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, none struck my eye more vividly than the equality of conditions (*l'égalité des conditions*). I discovered without difficulty the enormous influence that this primary fact exerts on the course of society; it gives a certain direction to the public spirit, a certain turn to the laws, new maxims to those who govern, and particular habits to the governed.

Soon I recognized that this same fact extends its influence well beyond political mores and laws, and that it gains no less dominion over civil society (*la société civile*) than over government: it creates opinions, gives birth to sentiments, suggests usages, and modifies everything it does not produce.

So, therefore, as I studied American society, more and more I saw in equality of conditions the generative fact from which each particular fact seemed to issue, and I found it before me constantly as a central point at which all my observations came to an end (*Democracy in America*, I, Introduction).^{5,6}

³The main content of this essay was presented, under the title "The French, Meiji and Chinese Revolutions in the Conceptual Framework of Tocqueville," at the September 2015 Waseda University Symposium on Tocqueville and East Asia: Reception and Relevance. This presentation was subsequently recorded in *The Tocqueville Review* 38:1 (2017). With substantial revisions added, this was then presented as a lecture at the *Collège de France* (4 June 2018), under the title "*Tocqueville et les trois révolutions: France (1789–), Japon (1867–), Chine (1911–)*." The manuscript for this presentation became the basis for a presentation at the Symposium of the Maison Franco-Japonaise in Tokyo (30 June 2018). The present essay is a further revised version of the manuscript for that presentation. My deep thanks to all those who offered me comments and questions throughout the writing process.

Additionally, for the idea of using Tocqueville in this analysis, I am indebted to Matsumoto Reiji's *Tokuviru de Kangaeru* ("Thinking with Tocqueville") (Misuzu-shobō, 2011).

⁴Cf., for example, Aristotle, *Politics* III.7, IV.6 – Tr.

⁵I use Mansfield and Winthrop's translation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), for which page numbers are given in the footnotes ("M/W"). Below, uncited book and section numbers (for example "(I.1.1)") refer everywhere to *Democracy in America*. – Tr.

⁶Quotations from *Democracy in America* are presented with the book, part, and chapter from the Pléiade edition (*De la Démocratie en Amérique*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Éditions Gallimard, 1992). This quote can be found in the Pléiade, p. 3; in M/W, p. 3.

In “democratic” (*démocratique*) society, there is no nobility. Not only that; there is almost a complete lack of any hereditary status by birth. Birth in this sense does not automatically determine anything about what a man or woman might be or become. In the society of “aristocracy,” the various statuses into which a person is born carry with them their respective traditional modes of life and determine their respective standard life-paths. In democracy, there is nothing like this. Rather, for all people, the conditions of life are fundamentally equal.

In this sense, then, both “democracy” and “aristocracy” are sociological types, not types of polity. Consequently, in Tocqueville for a society to be a “democracy” by no means implies that it be a “republic” (*république*): A “democratic” society governed by a king is also possible. In fact, we find that in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville writes as follows:

It is to be believed that the intellectual empire of the greatest number would be less absolute in a democratic people subject to a king than in the heart of a pure democracy; but it will always be very absolute, and whatever political laws regulate men in centuries of equality, one can foresee that faith in common opinion will become a sort of religion whose prophet will be the majority⁷ (*Democracy in America*, II.1.2, “On the Principal Source of Beliefs among Democratic Peoples”).

Evidently, in Tocqueville’s thinking, it is possible for “a democratic people subject to a king” (*un peuple démocratique soumis à un roi*) to exist.

Furthermore, according to Tocqueville, it is even possible for a “democratic people” to exist under the domination of a “despotism.”

As men become more alike and equal, it is more important that religions, while carefully putting themselves out of the way of the daily movement of affairs, not collide unnecessarily with the generally accepted ideas and permanent interests that reign among the mass; for common opinion (*l’opinion commune*) appears more and more as the first and most irresistible of powers; there is no support outside of it strong enough to permit long resistance to its blows. This is no less true in a democratic people subject to a despot than in a republic⁸ (II.1.5, “How, in the United States, Religion Knows How to Make Use of Democratic Instincts”).

Moreover, Tocqueville has the audacity to even say the following:

I believe that it is easier to establish an absolute and despotic government in a people where conditions are equal than in any other, and I think that if such a government were once established in a people like this, not only would it oppress men, but in the long term it would rob each of them of several of the principal attributes of humanity⁹ (II.4.7, “Continuation of the Preceding Chapters”).

In other words, once “democracy” becomes a reality, a democratic despotism has an *easier* time of emerging than does a democratic republic.

But in the history preceding Tocqueville’s warning, had it ever happened that such a paradoxical form of government worthy of the name “democratic despotism” actually emerged?

Of course, it had. I believe that, to Tocqueville’s thinking, China, particularly as it existed under the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and under the Qing Dynasty (1644–1910), was just such an actual example. This China was, for Tocqueville, a contemporary reality.

⁷In the *Pléiade*, p. 522; in *M/W*, p. 410.

⁸In the *Pléiade*, pp. 537–38; in *M/W*, pp. 422–23.

⁹In the *Pléiade*, p. 840; in *M/W*, p. 666.

China: Democratic Society

In the chapter of *Democracy in America* entitled “Why the Americans Apply Themselves to the Practice of the Sciences Rather Than to the Theory,” Tocqueville writes as follows:

If the lights that enlighten us (*les lumières qui nous éclairent*) ever came to be extinguished, they would be obscured little by little and as if by themselves. By dint of being confined to application, one would lose sight of principles, and when one had entirely forgotten the principles one would follow the methods derived from them badly; one would no longer be able to invent new ones, and one would employ without intelligence and without art the erudite procedures that one would no longer understand¹⁰ (II.1.10, “Why the Americans Apply Themselves to the Practice of the Sciences Rather Than to the Theory”).

Thus far, this is an account of the Americans. However, in the immediate sequel, Tocqueville suddenly begins to discourse on China.

When the Europeans landed in China three hundred years ago, they found that almost all the arts there had reached a certain degree of perfection, and they were astonished that having arrived at that point, they had not gone further. Later they discovered the vestiges of some advanced knowledge that had been lost. The nation was industrial; most of the scientific methods had been preserved within it; but science itself no longer existed. That explained to them the singular kind of immobility in which they had found the minds of this people. The Chinese, in following the trail of their fathers, had forgotten the reasons that had directed them (*ibid.*).¹¹

In other words, China is, and has been, of old, a real and continuous example of democracy. And at the same time, it is an image of the future that may perhaps befall America.

Tocqueville’s contemporary China is a real example of democracy; moreover, it is a possible future for both America and Europe. This may sound like a strange argument. I can almost hear the rebuttal: “Compared to the advanced region of Euro-America, isn’t the China of this time obviously backwards?” But Tocqueville, as if in response, clearly writes as follows – and we should note, his description is premised upon the fact that, in China at this time, unlike in places such as France or Japan, rulers were selected by means of a system of civil-service testing open to the public – the Imperial Examination (*kējū*):

In China, where equality of conditions is very great and very old (*À la Chine, où l’égalité des conditions est très grande et très ancienne*), a man passes from one public office to another only after submitting to a competition. This test is encountered at each step in his career, and the idea of it is so well introduced into mores that I remember having read a Chinese novel in which the hero after many vicissitudes finally touches the heart of his mistress by passing an examination well (II.3.19 “Why One Finds So Many Ambitious Men in the United States and So Few Great Ambitions”).¹²

¹⁰In the *Pléiade*, pp. 557–58; in *M/W*, p. 438.

¹¹In the *Pléiade*, p. 558; in *M/W*, p. 438.

¹²In the *Pléiade*, pp. 762–63; in *M/W*, p. 602. As for the “Chinese novel” here mentioned, it seems to have been “Yùjiāoli” (alternate title: *Shūang Měi Qíyuán*) by Zhāng Yún. This book was translated into French and published by Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832), an acquaintance of Tocqueville’s, as *Iu-Kiao-Li, ou les Deux cousins* (Paris: Moutardier, 1826). In this book, a novel of twenty chapters in the “scholar and beauty” (*cáizǐ jiārén*) genre, the main character Sū Yǒubái passes the Imperial Examination with high distinction, and in the end, has the auspicious joy of marrying his two female cousins (!). This novel is also mentioned in Part I (“The Oriental World”), Section I (“China”) of Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Alvarado trans. (Aalten: WordBridge Publishing, 2011), p. 112; Sibree trans. (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 125. Abel-Rémusat’s French translation is word for word and largely correct (although there are some obvious mistranslations), and moreover contains a lengthy interpretive essay and very attentive notes. I believe it provided a good reference for

“In China, where equality of conditions is very great and very old”! Here Tocqueville speaks very clearly. To repeat, in Tocqueville “democracy” is a society that takes for its principle the equality of conditions. There can be no doubt that Tocqueville thought that China as he knew it was indeed a “democratic society.” Tocqueville was no simple-minded progressivist or theorist of developmental stages. His thought had nothing in common with those who would theorize, for example, that one after another and in order, first, in the United States of America, then in Europe, and finally in “Asia,” “democratization” would proceed, bringing with it progress to a higher stage of development.

In Tocqueville’s thought, contrary to a frequent misunderstanding, democracy is not merely the situation of contemporary America; and neither is it merely the future of Europe. In fact, it was for him the very contemporary reality of China. That being said, the Chinese example was, for him, a real example of democracy which had proceeded in a very bad direction. In other words, in Tocqueville’s understanding, contemporary China was precisely a “democratic society” under the domination of a “despot”; its form of government was “despotism”; in sum, it was fully worthy of the name “democratic despotism” (*despotism démocratique*).

Actually, it seems that, when Tocqueville discoursed upon the bad effects that democracy may possibly bring, China quite often floated to his mind. For example, in the part of the work where he favorably points out that the reverse side of the strong governmental centralization in contemporary America (*la centralisation gouvernementale*) is a weak administrative centralization (*la centralisation administrative*), he includes a footnote which mentions China, as follows:

China appears to me to offer the most perfect emblem of the kind of social well-being that a very centralized administration can furnish to peoples who submit to it. Travelers tell us that the Chinese have tranquility without happiness, industry without progress, stability without force, and material order without public morality. Among them society always runs well enough, never very well. I imagine that when China is open to the Europeans, the latter will find the most beautiful model of administrative centralization that exists in the universe¹³ (I.1.5, “Necessity of Studying What Takes Place in the Particular States before Speaking of the Government of the Union”; “On the Political Effects of Administrative Decentralization in the United States,” n. 50).

China was indeed an administrative state with a high degree of centralized power. Regional rule was undertaken by governors (*zhīzhōu*, district governors; *zhīxiàn*, prefecture governors) dispatched for short periods of time from the capital. These governors served as administrative officials, tax-collection chiefs, police chiefs, public prosecutors, and judges. There were no independent courts. The governors, as representatives of the emperor, were tasked with all duties to ensure that the people in their territories were able to continuously make their livings in tranquility, and furthermore, ensure that the people lived their lives in accordance with Confucian morality. Actually, the regional governors were frequently called “mothers and fathers of the people” – “*mothers and fathers of the people*,” despite the fact that all the bureaucrats were male.¹⁴ This was because they were expected not only to lead

understanding Chinese society at that time. (Incidentally, are there any Euro-American or Japanese intellectuals today who would read long popular novels from the Qing dynasty in order to theorize things such as “democracy” or “America”? Perhaps it would not be so strange if we were to grant that Tocqueville may have had a more precise understanding than they do of premodern Chinese society.) The significance this novel had for Tocqueville is also pointed out by Françoise Mélonio, “Tocqueville, La Chine et le Japon (Introduction),” *The Tocqueville Review* 38:1 (2017), p. 9.

¹³In the *Pléiade*, p. 101; in *M/W*, p. 86.

¹⁴Anciently, there is also, in the *Classic of Poetry*, “How much to be rejoiced in are these princes, the parents of the people!” (Quoted at Legge, trans. *The Four Books*, p. 336), and in the *Book of Documents*, “the great sovereign is the father and mother of the people” (cf. translation given in James Legge, trans. *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Confucianism, Part I: The Shu King, The Religious Portion of the Shih King, The Hsiāo King* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), p. 125). In *Mencius* IA and IIIA, the duty of being “the father and mother of the people” is also emphasized. And regional bureaucrats were generally called “father-mother bureaucrats” (*fūmǔguān*); Qing regional bureaucrats frequently used such expressions themselves,

and occasionally harshly punish the people, but also to kindly and tenderly care for them, and look after them as a mother would her own child. In this sense we can regard the emperor as well as the regional bureaucracy as having been androgynous. This mode of rule was paternalism; at the same time, it was, so to speak, maternalism as well.¹⁵

This mode of rule obviously constituted a danger for the independence of spirit, as well as the autonomy, self-rule, and freedom of every individual person on the ruled side.¹⁶ For that reason, Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, was issuing a warning against the *Sinification* of America and Europe. Just behind the “Democracy in America” of which he spoke loomed the great dark shadow of “Democracy in China.” I wonder if it may not be the case that Tocqueville researchers have hitherto paid insufficient attention to this dimension of his work.¹⁷

As any researcher of Chinese history knows, contemporary China for Tocqueville, that is, Qing China, had no hereditary status, excepting the extremely small number of Manchus descended from those who conquered China in 1644. A half-century ago, Yoshikawa Kōjirō (1904–1980) pointed this out as follows:

I feel that one mistaken presumption into which Japanese people are prone to fall when studying the past history of China, and moreover perhaps the greatest such presumption, is to imagine that the kind of society characterized by a system of hereditary status which existed in Japan until the [nineteenth] century, also existed in China until the [nineteenth] century. From conversations with various people, I have come to know that, unexpectedly, this mistaken presumption is universally held.

As for why this is a mistaken presumption (as is well-known among experts), in China, the system of privileged status inherited through the family line had already become extinct over one thousand years ago, in the Northern Song Era [(960–1127)]. Therefore and thereafter, there were no families in China that should rightly be called nobility. This is not to say that there have been absolutely no periods with nobles throughout the course of China’s long history. During the Six Dynasties Era of the fourth to sixth centuries, there were families that should be called nobles, although this was not as concentrated as in the case of the Fujiwara clan in Japan. The following Tang Era (i.e., the seventh to ninth centuries) served as a transitional period between the social system of the Six Dynasties and the nobility-free society of the post-Song Era that was to follow; therefore[, the Tang] was a period in which both kinds of system coexisted in a mixed form. But from the tenth century’s Northern Song Era and down to the present century, that which we call a nobility has had absolutely no existence in China. [...] Moreover,

for example, cf. Yamamoto Eishi, *Funin-suru Chiken – Shindai no Chihōgyōseikan to Sono Ningenkankyō* (Kenbun-Shuppan, 2016), pp. 18–19, 44, 110, 125, 175, 191, 198, 199, 241, 324.

¹⁵Incidentally, both the king of England as well as the king of France were called and also depicted as the “Father of the nation.” Cf. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 46, 231; Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (University of California Press, 1992), pp. 17–52 (chapter 2, “The Rise and Fall of the Good Father”). But it would be hard to believe that these kings were simultaneously seen as mothers.

¹⁶However, within the thought of Zhū Xī (1130–1200), which served as the orthodoxy in the Ming and Qing dynasties, and therein reigned with overwhelming authority, emphasis is placed on the attitude which stands firm on the basis of one’s own inner “heavenly principle” of universal validity, “having one’s master within, and ruling oneself strictly” (Zhu Xi, *Commentary on the Analects*, 6.1) “having one’s master in one’s heart, and so being capable of being unmoved” (Zhu Xi, *Commentary on Mencius*, 2A.2). Such words of praise as “independent in mind and action,” “self-supporting,” “having one’s master within,” etc., are also characteristic of scholars of Zhu Xi’s school (for example, in Zhēn Dé Xiù’s (1178–1235) *Expanded Meaning of the Great Learning* (*Dà Xué Yān Yi*), books 16, 9, 4). But then, it was those on the ruling side who were meant to maintain this kind of spirit.

¹⁷For example, even Jianxun Wang does not in any way touch upon that, for Tocqueville, early modern China was already a “democratic society” – see his “The Road to Democracy in China: A Tocquevillian Analysis,” in *Conversations with Tocqueville: The Global Democratic Revolution in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Aurelian Craiutu and Sheldon Gellar (Lexington Books, 2009). However, Françoise Mélonio, a representative Tocqueville researcher in France today, does recognize that, in Tocqueville, China is an “example of a precocious democratic society,” see Françoise Mélonio, “Tocqueville, *La Chine et le Japon* (Introduction),” *The Tocqueville Review* 38:1 (2017), p. 9.

neither were there [Japanese-style] hereditary statuses such as “knights, agriculturists, craftsmen, merchants” or “warriors, townspeople, farmers.” To repeat, all such things were lacking in China in the thousand years following the Northern Song.¹⁸

Among the Han people, who comprised the overwhelming ethnic majority of the population, nothing like a nobility or hereditary regional magistracy, reigning over society and passing on status and wealth through generation after generation, existed.¹⁹ But a parliament did not exist either. In principle, the rulers, composing the bureaucracy that thinly covered the entire country like a net, were persons selected individually, from among the people, by means of the Imperial Examinations.

It was possible for any male, with a very few exceptions, to take this test. The test itself mainly certified the depth of the examinee’s cultivation in the Confucian classics by means of having him produce written essays. This was because it was thought that the most suitable rulers were men who deeply and correctly understood the Confucian classics, texts which, it was believed, showed the universal and unchanging truth pertaining to morality and rulership. If one repeatedly passed the strict, multi-stage tests, then finally there would come a test graded by the emperor himself (according to the official line, at any rate); this final stage was called the “Court Examination” (*diànshi*). A man who passed the Imperial Examinations with good marks could enter the inner core of the government, or else be dispatched as a regional governor. As the representative of the emperor, he would then rule over the people of some given area of China.²⁰

In short, there may not have been a parliamentary system in which representatives of the people were able to participate in politics; but even so, this was a political system in which men who had been selected from among the people through the formally equal system of examinations could, irrespective of their birth, achieve ruling status. Male individuals from the body of the people were, formally speaking, mutual equals. There was a possibility that even the poor son of a peasant might

¹⁸“*Chūgoku ni okeru kyōyōjin no chii*” (1960), in *Complete Works of Yoshikawa Kōjirō*, vol. II (Chikuma Shobō, 1968), pp. 425–26. Ellipses indicate my omissions, here and below.

¹⁹Perhaps someone will object that even in China, there were, in each area, powerful individuals known as “country gentlemen” (*xiāngshēn*). Indeed, these men held social prestige on the basis of their “property and cultivation” (and in combination with this, their record of passing the Imperial Examinations up to a given stage, or having a history of bureaucratic service, etc.). However, this prestige was no stable thing. Kishimoto Mio compares the status of this prestige to that of stock-prices influenced by the market: “If people chose the country gentlemen as their protectors, the criteria for their choice were not based in land ownership or connection with the state power considered for its own sake, but rather, surely, for no other reason than the way in which these elements appeared within regional societies as [founding an] actual protective capacity. That the people could predict that, if those country gentlemen opened their mouths, most people would follow [their directives]; that the people could assume that, even if the country gentlemen pushed their desires in a somewhat unreasonable way, that the people would fear their influence too much to oppose them – these things were enabled by the fact that the country gentlemen [were regarded as generally] reliable existences. To put the matter in a different way, that many people gathered round the country gentlemen, and that everyone recognized the country gentlemen as existences of influence – these [facts] themselves gave rise to the protective capacity of the country gentlemen, and it was as a result of this that people gathered round them in the first place. That which caused the people to gather round the country gentlemen was that people gathered round the country gentlemen. This is obviously a circular argument; but nevertheless, it may serve as one clue to comprehending the variegated form of existence of the country gentlemen. This was similar, for example, to speculation in the stock market. When people invest in a promising stock, the stock-price goes up and the investors make a profit, but the root of that profit is just the fact itself that many people invested in that stock. The common knowledge that ‘this stock is promising,’ the prediction that many people will invest in it, the actual behavior based upon that knowledge – it is these things that raise the stock-price. Within the common knowledge of people of this time, to pass the Imperial Examination was one occasion for receiving the stamp which read ‘promising stock.’ Most people would seek a connection to this ‘promising stock’ and so would gather round, and this [gathering] itself would form the influence of the country gentleman in question. And if a given stock-price began to fall, people would discard that one and move onto a new promising stock.” Kishimoto Mio, “*Min-Shinjidai no Kyōshin*,” in *Min-Shin-kōtai to Kōnan-Shakai – 17 Seiki Chūgoku no Chitsujo Mondai* (Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppan-Kai, 1999), pp. 52–53.

²⁰Regarding the Imperial Examination system, cf. Miyazaki Ichisada’s two works, *Kakyoshi* (Heibonsha, 1987), and *Kakyo – Chūgoku no Shiken Jigoku* (Chūōkōronsha, 1963).

achieve the rank of “Grand Secretary” or “Minister of the Grand Council.” The following words from Tocqueville seem indeed to record this state of affairs:

A sort of equality can even be established in the political world although there may be no political freedom (*la liberté politique*). One might be equal to all those like him except the one who is, without any distinction, the master of all and who picks the agents of his power equally from among all (II.II.1, “Why Democratic Peoples Show a More Ardent and More Lasting Love for Equality Than for Freedom”).²¹

The Particular Characteristics of “Democratic Society”

Until the Tang Dynasty (618–907), there were nobles in China. Already under the Tang, the Imperial Examination system was employed in a partial way, but at that time, many nobles were nevertheless able to continue maintaining high status and large properties over the generations. But after the collapse of the Tang Dynasty, over the course of a violent civil war that continued for about a half-century, those who had hitherto been nobles became extinct. As a result, the subsequently established Song Dynasty (960–1279) had no choice when selecting human resources to assist with the rule of the emperor: They were forced by circumstances to select from among the newly leveled body of the people. This dynasty therefore came to select nearly all of the high-level bureaucrats by means of the Imperial Examinations. Thereafter in China, until the beginning of the twentieth century, with the exception of the single period of Mongolian domination (1259–1368), the Imperial Examination system functioned continuously.

Again, the Imperial Examination was an essay test designed to inquire into one’s level of Confucian cultivation. This meant that, unlike, say, the graduates of contemporary French ENA (*École nationale d’administration*), those who passed the exam can by no means be said to have had any administrative knowledge. Whether or not they had any practical capabilities is also unclear. But we can probably assume that, after enduring long years in tedious study for the test, those who among the many test-takers could pass the multi-day written examinations were at least both studious and healthy. And surely the possibility was high that, unlike nobles, whose high official positions would have been based upon their families’ property and status, those who had been themselves chosen by means of the test held deep feelings of gratitude and loyalty toward both the emperor and the dynasty. Moreover, one whose Confucian cultivation had been attested to by this certification gained an authority *vis-à-vis* lower officials and the people, etc. – an authority which substituted for or replaced that of “noble blood” or “family.”

Many Japanese and Anglosphere historians call the period in China from the Song Dynasty to the final Qing Dynasty the “early modern” period (*kinsei*), or “early modern China.”²² And it was this “early modern China” that was, for Tocqueville, a “democratic society.”

In actuality, the China of this period indeed had many of the characteristics of “democratic society” depicted by Tocqueville.

In the first place, when Tocqueville theorized the “Social State of the Anglo-Americans” at the head of *Democracy in America*, he immediately pointed out the importance of the system of inheritance:

I am astonished that ancient and modern political writers have not attributed to estate laws²³ a greater influence on the course of human affairs. These laws belong, it is true, to the civil order; but they ought to be placed at the head of all political institutions, for they have an incredible influence on the social state of peoples, of which political laws are only the expression (I.1.3

²¹In the *Pléiade*, p. 608; in *M/W*, p. 479.

²²The first to point out the epochal character of the Song Era, and so to call that which followed “early modern,” was, of course, Naitō Torajirō (Konan) (1866–1934).

²³In n. 1 to this page, Tocqueville explains: “I understand by estate laws all laws whose principal goal is to regulate the fate of goods after the death of the property owner.” – Tr.

“On the Social State of the Anglo-Americans,” “That the Salient Point of the Anglo-Americans Is Its Being Essentially Democratic”).²⁴

According to Tocqueville, the system of primogeniture conforms to the society of “aristocracy,” the reason being that by means of this system, status and property maintain a stable succession. On the other hand, the system of equal partition, viz., dividing property equally between heirs – or at least, between male heirs – is that which conforms to democratic society, because older brother and younger brother alike are, *qua* human beings, equal.

And in actuality, a system of equal partition between male heirs was the established custom in early modern China.²⁵ Moreover, there was complete freedom to buy and sell land, something that was actually done frequently.²⁶ On top of that, there was a tendency for fathers possessed of extended land holdings to have many sons. This was because such large landowners usually had concubines as well as their wives (and standardly, their wives and concubines lived together). Therefore, with each succession, land-holdings became increasingly subdivided. In this way, the offspring of persons whose extended land-holdings had given them great regional influence quickly became impoverished.

This was a basic condition of Chinese democracy.

There were always in China both extremely rich and extremely poor people. And the rancor of the extremely poor had frequently expressed itself explosively in Chinese history. However, neither wealth nor poverty was a permanent status. There was a constant mobility between the wealthy stratum and the impoverished stratum.²⁷

In the second place, as a consequence of the first condition just described, people strove with all their might to seek economic wealth and high status. These pursuits were not considered to be shameful. It was a matter of course that one would nakedly display one’s ambition for wealth, and that one would attempt both to have contact with and also to use other people to this end. It was felt that, since everyone did such things, not to do them was to court a certain downfall whose final trajectory could not be foreseen. Such a possibility indeed existed. Actually, *gōng xǐ fā cái* was [(and remains – Tr.)] a set-greeting at the New Year; the literal meaning of this expression is “Congratulations for earning money!” Admittedly, perhaps this expression is similar to what is said to have been the traditional greeting-words of Ōsaka merchants, “You been earnin’?” (*mōkarimak’ka?*), and so cannot be considered too distinctive, let alone distinctively “democratic.” However, a further oft-used expression of good wishes in China was *shēng guān fā cái*, with the meaning of “Become a bureaucrat and earn some money!” – and this latter expression was certainly one which could never have come from the mouth of the Ōsaka merchants of Tocqueville’s time.

Tocqueville indicates the following:

One must recognize that equality, which introduces great goods into the world, nevertheless suggests to men very dangerous instincts, as will be shown hereafter; it tends to isolate them from

²⁴In the *Pléiade*, p. 52; in *M/W*, p. 47.

²⁵Shiga Shūzō, *Chūgoku Kazokuhō no Genri* (Sōbunsha 1967), pp. 82–286; Kobayashi Kazumi, *Chūka-sekai no Kokka to Minshū*, vol. II, part II, chapter 4, “*Kasankinbun Sōzoku no Bunka to Chūgoku Nōsonshakai*” (Kyūko Shoin, 2008), pp. 115–42; Terada Hiroaki, *Chūgoku Hōseiishi*, chapter 1, “*Hito to Ie*,” section 1, “*Ie*,” §3, “*Kasanbunkatsu Kyōdaikinbun no Gensoku*” (Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppan-Kai, 2018), pp. 23–25.

²⁶Terada Hiroaki, *Chūgoku Hōseiishi*, chapter 2, “*Seigyō to Zaisan*,” section 1, “*Kangyō*,” §1, “*Tochibaibai no Hindo*” (Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppan-Kai, 2018), pp. 45–47.

²⁷Kobayashi Kazumi indicates as follows: “In premodern China, one can say that ‘the bureaucratic class was the dominant class.’ But these bureaucratic privileges were only secure for a single generation, and due to the system of equal division of family property, it can be called a near-certainty that their children were fated to be buried [once again] amidst the generality of the people. The Chinese state maintained itself by a ceaseless and repeated metabolism whereby, with the ruin of each individual old bureaucrat, a new bureaucrat would be selected by means of the Imperial Examination from amongst the generality of the people. In this way, members of particular families or particular classes were prevented from obtaining a dominant hereditary status and ensconcing themselves in positions of power for the long-term. In this way China’s dynastic state was truly flexible and held a powerful apparatus for ‘ceaselessly leveling and cycling the bureaucratic layer with and through the people’” (Kobayashi, *Chūka-sekai no Kokka to Minshū*, vol. II, p. 142).

one another and to bring each of them to be occupied with himself alone. It opens their souls excessively to the love of material enjoyments (*l'amour des jouissances matérielles*)²⁸ (II.1.5, “How, in the United States, Religion Knows How to Make Use of Democratic Instincts”).

I did not encounter a citizen in America so poor that he did not cast a glance of hope and longing on the enjoyments of the rich and whose imagination was not seized in advance by the goods that fate was obstinately refusing him.²⁹ (II.2.10, “On the Taste for Material Well-Being in America”).

In the third place, there is the importance of public opinion.

Discursing upon the rule of regional bureaucrats in premodern China, China historian Miyazaki Ichisada pointed out that “Because from ancient times, China has been the country of public opinion, to ignore the intention of the masses [was] to fail” (and this is certainly not something that could be said of Tokugawa Japan (1603–1867)).³⁰ The Chinese regional bureaucrats worked hard toward making an ally of public opinion in each area, through their attitude and utterances at trials, which were open to the public (unlike the court in Tokugawa Japan, the *oshirasu*), as well as through notices and propaganda fliers directed toward the general public.³¹ This was because the trend of peoples’ opinion (“the peoples’ heart” (*rénxīn*), “public opinion” (*gōng lùn*)) held great influence, and also affected the degree of obedience that could be expected from a bureaucrat’s subordinates (most of whom were unsalaried locals who made their living through charging fees to people who called upon the local office); these subordinates were charged with carrying out the bureaucrat’s practical duties (occasionally, these subordinates were known even to carry out collective strikes). The process and final decisions of trials were also affected by the trend of the *rénxīn*; and indeed, these trials themselves were nothing but one means of attempting to influence that trend. This did not contradict the pretextual ruling principle of paternalism-maternalism. After all, as the Confucian *Great Learning* taught, “To like what the people like, and to hate what the people hate: This is what is called to be the father and mother of the people.”³² As Zhu Xi explained in his annotation to this sentence (in his commentary, *Dà Xué Zhāng Jù*), to “make the people’s heart his own heart” is the duty of the “father and mother of the people”; and if one “loves the people as one’s own child,” then presumably “the people will love him as their father and mother.” The “people” must follow their “father and mother,” but the “father and mother” must also follow the intentions and the public opinion of the “people.” In the end, between the bureaucrats and the people, and additionally among the people themselves, contention or competition to guarantee this mutual following was bound to appear.

Under the title “Law as Market Prices” (*Sōba to shite no Hō*) (!), specialist of Chinese legal history Terada Hiroaki explained as follows:

Regional society [in China] was full to the brim with both people who could give influence, and behavior that was carried out having received that influence. In the final analysis, what we find here is, [on the one hand,] the [social] fact of the hearts of individual people or groups of people shifting and changing, or else a state of affairs in which they no less factually stood still; [and on the other hand], every kind and every mode of impulsion being carried out by the various subjects in the bureaucracy and society.

²⁸In the *Pléiade*, pp. 532–33; in *M/W*, p. 419.

²⁹In the *Pléiade*, p. 643; in *M/W*, p. 507.

³⁰Lan Dingyuan, *Lù Zhōu Gōng Àn* (Japanese trans. Miyazaki Ichisada, *Rokushū-Kōan – Shinchō Chihō Saibankan no Kiroku* (Heibonsha, 1967), p. 150).

³¹For example, on pages 185–89 of the work of Lan Dingyuan, cited above, is quoted an actual example of a tract that the regional bureaucracy circulated widely within a prefecture with the aim of isolating a clan that had, as a group, refused to pay taxes.

³²See *The Four Books: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean, and The Works of Mencius*, with English translation and Notes by James Legge (China: The Commercial Press [Date not given]), p. 336. URL = <<https://archive.org/details/fourbooksconfuci00leggiala/>>. – Tr.

If we were to express this in our words, rather than institutional “law,” [this social system] had a motion far closer to what we call a “market.” As the typical examples of *xiàoyóu* [Watanabe: viz., performing misdeeds learned from seeing others’ misdeeds] made clear, here every human being, at the same time both a subject that decided upon its own behavior by referring to the immediately surrounding market, was also contrariwise a subject that strove to change that market *via* their own behavior. Granted, market fluctuations did take place due to some person’s projective action and peoples’ factual following along; but it also happened that some person from among the people would positively deliver a “speech” or a “pioneering declaration” that would then progressively proliferate among the people “just going along with the crowd” in that environment. And the state, or equivalently, the bureaucrats, also worked as an actor in the formation of this market. Occasionally it did happen that market fluctuations would take place solely by [governmental] interventions [such as] notices (“oral interventions”), but occasionally it would happen that, even when some [direct governmental] intervention by force was carried out, nothing would change anyway (rather, [the attempted intervention] would be “deluged and toppled” or “smothered under” by the market).³³

As we saw above, Tocqueville indicated that, in democratic society, because any towering authority serving as a foundation has vanished, in the final analysis, “common opinion appears more and more as the first and most irresistible of powers; there is no support outside of it strong enough to permit long resistance to its blows. This is no less true in a democratic people subject to a despot than in a republic” (II.1.5, “How, in the United States, Religion Knows How to Make Use of Democratic Instincts”).

Indeed, ought we not to consider the situation of early modern China, wherein “law,” too, occasionally became nothing more than one kind of “popularity market,” the ultimate real example of this phenomenon?

In the fourth place, in early modern China, unceasing change coexisted with permanence. In other words, this condition of dynamism maintained itself.

Greatly differing from Tokugawa Japan, the society of early modern China was a society both of great “vertical mobility” (i.e., people both rose and fell in social status, etc.) and great “horizontal mobility” (i.e., people moved from place to place geographically).³⁴

But all the while, both the family system which rendered people of the same paternal lineage part of the same clan (*zú*), and the system of inheritance based on the principle of equal division between male heirs, remained unchanging. The political system of every dynasty was of roughly the same kind, except for the single period of the Yuan era, i.e., Mongolian rule (1259–1368). The criminal law code established at the end of the fourteenth century (the *Laws of the Ming* (*Míng Lǚ*)), at least formally, continued to be valid and applied more or less without any changes until the end of the Qing era – in other words, until the twentieth century.³⁵ And all the while, the same written characters remained in use; all the while, the intelligentsia wrote their essays in a style of more or less unchanged classical Chinese. And each dynasty compiled the detailed history of the previous dynasty

³³Terada, *Chūgoku Hōseishi*, pp. 304–5. N.B. that the “market” metaphor used by Kishimoto (as quoted in note 19 above) to explain the “power” of the “country gentlemen” also appears here. Perhaps it is the case that, within a thoroughly “democratic” society, everything is decided by the whims of the “popularity market” in each moment.

³⁴Kobayashi Kazumi introduces the following sort of “popular proverbs” from the Ming and Qing eras: “Wealth does not continue longer than three generations” (*fū bù chū sān dài*); “In a hundred years, a piece of land is turned over thrice to new families” (*bāi nián tuān zhuān sān jiā*); “In a thousand years a piece of land changes over to one hundred different masters” (*qiān nián tú dì huàn bǎi zhī*); “In a thousand years, farmland changes over to eight hundred different masters” (*qiān nián tiān dì huàn bā bǎi zhū*). Kobayashi, *Chūka-sekai no Kokka to Minshū*, vol. II, p. 133.

³⁵Shiga Shūzō, *Chūgoku Hōseishi Ronshū – Hōten to Keibatsu* (Sōbunsha, 2003). Moreover, “The *Laws of the Ming* was itself composed in great part from absorptions of the *Laws of the Tang* – it was, so to speak, a recension of the *Laws of the Tang*” (Shiga Shūzō “Atogaki,” in *Yakuchū Nihon-ritsuryō*, vol. V, *Tōritsu Sogi Yakuchū-hen*, ed. Ritsuryō-Kenkyūkai (Tōkyō-dō Shuppan, 1974), p. 342.

that had preceded it in the same form and style. In that history, countless people appear on the stage and countless incidents transpire; and yet, reading it on the surface level, one receives an impression as though, after all, the entirety is nothing but infinite repetition.

And according to Tocqueville, it was *just this very thing* that was the special characteristic of democratic society. He discourses upon this fact under the title, “How the Aspect of Society in the United States Is at Once Agitated and Monotonous” (II.3.16), and moreover, five chapters later, he describes the following:

Two things are astonishing in the United States: the great mobility of most human actions and the singular fixity of certain principles. Men move constantly, the human mind seems almost immobile (II.3.21, “Why Great Revolutions Will Become Rare”).³⁶

This quite resembles the portrait of China drawn by Hegel (1770–1831) in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*.³⁷

Besides the imperial dignity, there is properly no elevated rank, no nobility among the Chinese; only the princes of the imperial house, and the sons of the ministers, enjoy any precedence of the kind, and they rather by their position than by their birth. Otherwise all are equal, and only those have a share in the administration of affairs that have ability for it. Official stations are therefore occupied by men of the greatest intellect and education. The Chinese state has consequently been often set up as an ideal which may serve even us for a model. [...] In China the empire is of absolute *equality*, and all the differences that exist are possible only in connection with that [empire’s] administration, and in virtue of the worth which a person may acquire, enabling him to fill a high post in the government. Since equality prevails in China, but not freedom, despotism is necessarily the mode of government.³⁸

History must begin with the empire of China, for it is the oldest of which history gives us any report. Indeed, China’s principle is of such substantiality that it is at once the oldest and the newest for this empire. Early on we see China advancing to the condition in which it is found at the present day; for as it yet lacks the antithesis between objective being and subjective purposeful movement [*Daranbewegung*], any mutability is excluded, and the fixedness of a character which recurs perpetually takes the place of what we should call the historical.³⁹

However, unlike Hegel, Tocqueville did not simply call this state of affairs “despotism.” Rather, he thought of it as a combination of “democracy” and “despotism.” And unlike Hegel, he did not think of this as manifesting the immature state of the history of the human race. Neither did he leave the matter settled by regarding China as some far-off Other of a fundamentally different nature. Rather, what Tocqueville saw in China was one side of contemporary America, and moreover, perhaps the image of Europe’s future. It was this possibility that gave him the deepest anxiety.⁴⁰

³⁶In the *Pléiade*, p. 775; in *M/W*, p. 611.

³⁷I use Ruben Alvarado, trans., *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (Aalten: WordBridge Publishing, 2011); I also give page numbers for J. Sibree’s translation (of which Alvarado’s is a revision), which may be easier to access (New York: Dover, 1956). – Tr.

³⁸G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Alvarado trans., pp. 112–13; Sibree trans., p. 124.

³⁹G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Alvarado trans., 105; Sibree trans., p. 116.

⁴⁰There was a basis for this anxiety. In fact, both the so-called physiocrats as well as the Saint-Simonists frequently held up this image of China as an ideal. Tocqueville criticized these thinkers as follows: “This particular form of tyranny, known as democratic despotism, of which the Middle Ages had no idea, was already familiar to the Economists: no more social hierarchy, no more well-demarcated classes, no more fixed ranks; a people composed of almost identical and entirely equal individuals, an indistinct mass recognized as the only legitimate sovereign [...] and] above it, a single designated official charged with acting in its name without consulting it [...]. Not finding anything in their vicinity that lived up to this ideal, they went looking for it in the remote corners of Asia. I am not exaggerating when I say that there was not a single Economist who did

The Revolution in China (1911–)

In the autumn of 1911, the “democratic society” which had continued across so many centuries in central mainland China saw its subjection to the emperor’s domination come to an end. Thereupon was declared the establishment of a *mínguó*, which is to say, a *république*.

Why was it that such a revolution had taken place?

It was not the case that the system of divided inheritance, which formed the basis of “democratic society,” had been shaken in the beginning of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the system of families (*jiāzú*) or clans (*zōngzú*), formed by the chains of the paternal lines, also continued to function. And both before and after the revolution, the fierce competitive struggle over wealth and status also continued.

In short, imperial domination had not ended as the result of an upheaval in the long-continuing principles of Chinese society. Moreover, neither was it the case that a hereditary status which had hitherto been powerful in society, but whose power had not been reflected politically, revolted and thereby became the new dominant status. In fact, there was, and for quite a long time had been, no hereditary status of this kind.

However, for over half a century, failures of government had piled up one after another; the dynastic government had lost prestige and was in crisis, and for the sake of survival, it had begun pursuing a program of reform since the end of the nineteenth century. In the final analysis, it was this which invited its own collapse. For with these attempts at improvement and reform came simultaneously expanding hopes and discontents; the result was collapse. As Tocqueville himself indicated, this political process is one that repeats itself throughout history.⁴¹

Especially important was the abolition, in 1904, of the Imperial Examination system.

This meant, in the first place, that the most important rules in China’s “democratic society” which regulated the competition for status and wealth changed. As a result, conscientious people who wished to rescue the people from their suffering, nationalists who wished themselves to stand at the head of the people and “wipe away” the “shame” of the “race,” ambitious individuals who wished to gain high status and thereby obtain power and wealth – all of these types of people and more were compelled to grope with the utmost effort toward a different method of advancement. As a result, the number of students who sought to leave China to study in foreign countries rapidly rose, and there was also a rise in a form of consciousness that suggested to the Chinese that they take as a model what these students had learned abroad regarding the ways of modern Western states. Radical parties also appeared on the stage, promoting an ideology which particularly emphasized the fact that the dynastic system of the Qing dynasty was one wherein the Han majority was under minority rule by those of a different race, viz., the Manchus; and these parties sought the restoration of rights to the Han “race” (under the slogan “Extinguish the Manchus, and make the Han thrive” (*miè Mǎn xīng Hàn*)).

In the second place, the abolition of the Imperial Examination system meant that Confucianism, hitherto totally integrated with the government, lost its reigning status. A portion of the people who had until this point regarded the teachings of Confucianism as self-evident truth, moreover, now began a fundamental rethinking of politics and ethics. In the May Fourth Movement, which began in 1919, young intellectuals issued proclamations which denied Confucianism in all aspects, reaching a point that called forth significant response.

Why, then, had such self-destructive reforms been carried out in the first place?

not somewhere in his writings lavish fulsome praise on China.” Alexis de Tocqueville, *L’Ancien régime et la Révolution*, III.3 (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Éditions Gallimard, 2004), pp. 190–1; Arthur Goldhammer, trans. (Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 147). Actually, François Quesnay, for example, indeed had words of praise for China in his *Despotisme de la Chine* (1767): “... China, whose constitution is founded upon laws wise and irrevocable, which the Emperor maintains, and himself follows exactly,” etc. *Ceuvres économiques et philosophiques de F. Quesnay* (Frankfurt and Paris: Jules Peelman, 1888), p. 564.

⁴¹ “[E]xperience teaches that the most dangerous time for a bad government is usually when it begins to reform. [...] The evil that one endures patiently because it seems inevitable becomes unbearable the moment its elimination becomes conceivable.” *L’Ancien régime et la Révolution*, III.4 (Pléiade, p. 202; Goldhammer trans., p. 157).

It goes without saying: These reforms were the result of the pressure brought to bear on China by the European countries that had, through the Industrial Revolution, come to possess colossal military and economic power. In both 1860 and 1900, the Chinese capital of Beijing was occupied by foreign armies. Moreover, it was not just Europe. In 1894–1895, China had gone to war [the Sino-Japanese War] with Japan – hitherto regarded as nothing more than the barbarians to the east – and been defeated. This provided an especially great shock to the intellectuals and bureaucrats – two social layers which, in China, had a fair degree of overlap. And any feelings of loyalty aroused were not toward the dynasty, which had already been the object of deep disillusionment, but rather toward the “race” and the “country,” etc. The vast expanse of “All under heaven” (*tiān xià*)⁴² now came to assume a clear outline, as the “race,” or else as the “China” (*Zhōng guó*, literally, the middle kingdom or central country) which opposed and resisted the various other countries of the world; and this strengthened the consciousness in which this notion and that of “self” came together and overlapped.⁴³ In this way, the Sino-Japanese War proved an important trigger or catalyst which forced the Chinese to the thought that, from now on, the accustomed way of doing things could no longer be maintained.

In short, this revolution did not mean a collapse of the democracy that, in Tocqueville’s meaning, had existed in China for so many centuries. On the contrary, due to the work of a great force coming from *outside* “democratic society,” the government, which had until then managed that society, lost its authority; and it was in order to respond to this external force that “democratic society” itself increased its cohesion on the ideal level. Moving from “below,” “democratic society” deserted or alienated itself from its already-unreliable government (which had so gracefully bestowed upon it, in 1908, a fully five-year-old child for an emperor) and *forced* it to collapse.

After this, society continued to grope for an answer to the questions revolving around what new form of government could allow the “race,” constructed by “democratic society,” to flourish. Suffice it to say here that it did not go very well. Violence spread as well. As a result, a super-radical school of thought emerged, according to which even the “society” hitherto existing, as well as the “culture” and “spirit” which had preserved it – even these must be transformed. As a result, and with the added factor provided by the chaos accompanying the Japanese army’s large-scale aggressive invasion, a conclusion emerged that could not even have been foreseen at the time of the beginning of the 1911 revolution: namely, the establishment of Communist Party domination.

In any case, how did Japan, a tiny neighboring country hitherto regarded as barbaric, become a country capable of prosecuting a war against China, and moreover, emerging from that war victorious?

Of course, this was because, just slightly over forty years before the Chinese revolution, a revolution had occurred in Japan too; Japan had rapidly learned the “civilization” of the West, and a great program of domestic reform had been undertaken.

So then, why did a revolution occur in Japan? That is our next problem.

The Revolution in Japan (1867–)

Perhaps we may consider the revolution that happened in Japan – that is, the Meiji Revolution⁴⁴ – as having occurred for the same kind of reasons and as having brought about the same kind of results as

⁴²An ancient Chinese expression that more or less means “the whole world” and “the whole country.” – Tr.

⁴³For details, cf., for example, Yoshizawa Seiichirō, *Aikoku-shugi no Sōsei – Nashonarizumu kara Kindai-Chūgoku wo Miru* (Iwanami-shoten, 2003).

⁴⁴There may still be readers who doubt that the “Meiji Restoration” was, in fact, a “revolution.” But the “Meiji Restoration” changed not only the political regime and social system, but everything from the laws, the judicial system, the economy, the education, learning in general, clothes, hairstyle, and manners, and even the language (both the style of writing and the vocabulary), even extending to the calendar and the way of reckoning time. If this enormous and irreversible transformation, this abrupt historical turning-point, cannot be called a revolution, then what on earth is a revolution? Those who would claim that one cannot call anything a “revolution” that lacks a large-scale uprising of the “mass public” are, I suspect, trapped in a romantic fantasy. Even when transformations occur along with uprisings of the “mass public,” it often happens that in the

those which Tocqueville understood of the French Revolution. Regarding the French Revolution, Tocqueville explains as follows in his *The Old Regime and the Revolution*:⁴⁵

When we isolate the Revolution from all the contingencies that momentarily altered its aspect in various times and places and consider it only as it was in itself, we see clearly that its sole effect was to abolish the political institutions, usually called feudal (*le nom d'institutions féodales*), that had for centuries reigned unopposed in most of the nations of Europe, and to replace them with a simpler and more uniform social and political order based on equality of conditions (*un ordre social et politique plus uniforme et plus simple, quit avait l'égalité des conditions pour base*) (*The Old Regime and the Revolution*, Book I, chap. 5).⁴⁶

Which is to say, in the first place, “the equality of conditions”; which is to say, the actualization of what Tocqueville calls “democracy.” The system of hereditary status is abolished, and all in the nation – or actually, just the males – become, identically, “citizens” and are standardized as such. In the second place, on the basis of this kind of “democratic society” is carried out the unification or consolidation of a centralized state power.

In the Meiji Revolution we indeed find that just these two things also took place (on the other hand, in China, both had been actualized since ancient times).

end these incidents appear to amount to transient efforts that come to nothing. Moreover, the English “Glorious Revolution” was unaccompanied by anything like an uprising of the mass public. “In essence, the Glorious Revolution was a *coup d'état* undertaken by an adventurous foreign prince and his mercenary army, supported by local aristocracies, not an uprising of the people” (David Hayton, “Contested Kingdoms, 1688–1756,” in *The Eighteenth Century, 1688–1815*, ed. Paul Longford (Oxford University Press 2002), p. 36). Surely what is at issue is the question of the scale and content of the reforms which were actualized. If the “Meiji Restoration” does not fit the definition of a “revolution,” does that not rather indicate that the definition itself is faulty?

Incidentally, an English diplomat who was a direct eyewitness to this transformation, Ernest Satow, called it “the Revolution of 1868,” and referred to the Boshin War (1868–1869) as “the war of the revolution.” Ernest Satow, *A Diplomat in Japan* (Stone Bridge Press, 2006 [1921]), p. 19; also, see pp. 59, 61, 78, 130, 143, 157, 177, 195, 198, 202, 270, 274, 424. The same can be said of Algernon Bertram, a colleague of Satow’s – see *Mitford’s Japan: Memories and Recollections 1866–1906*, ed. Hugh Cortazzi (Japan Library, 2002), pp. 11, 12, 39, 58, 60, 64, 94, 126, 145.

Moreover, in the Meiji period, expressions such as the “Restoration-Revolution” (*ishin kakumei*) were also widely used among the Japanese. For example, in Takekoshi Yosaburō’s (1865–1950) *Shin Nihon-shi* (pub. 1892), we find “I. Fundamental Vicissitudes in Thought and in the Imperial Throne in Connection with the Restoration-Revolution”; “II. Social Revolution and the Contradictory Structural Triad in the World of Thought”; “If the social shifts [proceeding from] the nature of the Restoration-Revolution are as I have explained, [then slogans such as,] for example, ‘Revere the Emperor,’ ‘Expel the Barbarian,’ ‘Assist the Shogunate,’ ‘Destroy the Shogunate,’ ‘Combine the Imperial House and the Military into One Body’ – all these [slogans] were nothing more than scattered branches and grasses floating to the top of the waves created by the great transformation” (*Meiji Shironshū I, Meiji Bungaku Zenshū*, vol. 77 (Chikuma-shobō, 1965), pp. 133, 142, 143). In Tokutomi Sohō’s (1863–1957) *Yoshida Shōin* (pub. 1893), we find: “Even if I have titled [this work] *Yoshida Shōin* [...] it would perhaps not have been impossible to retitling it *On the Prehistory of the Restoration-Revolution*”; “Within the Restoration-Revolution, [Yoshida Shōin] was a towering vanguard. It would be impossible to speak of him without also speaking of the Restoration-Revolution” (*Tokutomi Sohō Shū, Meiji Bungaku Zenshū*, vol. 34 (Chikuma-shobō, 1974), pp. 159, 161). In Yamaji Aizan’s (1865–1917) *Gendai Nihon Kyōkai-shiron* (pub. 1906), we find: “The Restoration’s revolution was a total revolution, a fundamental revolution that passed through both the spiritual and the material” (*Kirisuto-kyō Hyōron – Nihon Jinmin-shi* (Iwanami-bunko, 1966), p. 8).

Moreover, in recent years, Anglosphere scholars who reject the strange and seriously misleading appellation “Meiji Restoration” in favor of “Meiji Revolution” have also been increasing – cf. Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 333–70 (chap. 11, “The Meiji Revolution”); Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan from Tokugawa Times to the Present* (Oxford University Press, 2003) (Part 2: “Modern Revolution, 1868–1905”). Both of these are representative textbooks of Japanese history aimed at college students.

⁴⁵I use Arthur Goldhammer’s translation, entitled *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2011). – Tr.

⁴⁶*L’Ancien régime et la Révolution* (1856), I,5 (Pléiade, p. 86; Goldhammer trans., p. 26).

Since the seventeenth century, Japan had been governed by a hereditary caste [*mibun*; elsewhere, “hereditary status” or “status” – Tr.] of warriors. The military which organized these warriors⁴⁷ was at the same time the governing organization, and dominated the townspeople and peasants, etc.

However, the internal discontent of the governing *samurai* caste itself gradually rose, especially among the lower stratum of *samurai*. Although they were supposedly soldiers, they had no opportunity of fighting a war for over two centuries; nevertheless, as a principle, the hereditary succession continued. They remained proud of being soldiers, but the fact that this title carried with it no substance was obvious. Moreover, especially the lower stratum of *samurai* suffered economic hardship, even poverty. On top of this, due to the system of hereditary rank which existed *within* the *samurai* hereditary status, no matter how capable a man may have been, it remained difficult for him to achieve any promotion in status. Among the *samurai* – of high pride and yet impoverished, living lives in which it was difficult to find any meaning – discontent, particularly toward the system of hereditary status, grew. As a result, there rose among them a fervent desire *for* crisis: At one stroke, they fantasized, they could retrieve their warrior’s bona fides, see action in a war, become “heroes,” and achieve a promotion in status. In this state, at the end of the eighteenth century, they became especially riled up, the flames of their hostility stoked, by the sight of the Euro-American ships frequently appearing in Japan’s coastal waters.

It was during the period of this sort of domestic situation that, in 1853, four battleships from the United States of America, including two state-of-the-art steamships, were sent to Japan, invading until they were actually facing the city of Edo (today’s Tokyo), whereupon with a firm attitude, they demanded that the harbors be opened for them. And after this was accepted by the Japanese government, the [US] consul, having arrived in Japan, both firmly and shrewdly demanded the commencement of trade relations.

The majority of low-stratum *samurai* who saw the Tokugawa government’s response to this provocation reacted in opposition to the government; to their eyes, the government had acted with base serenity toward the Euro-American powers. The government attempted to suppress this kind of opposition, but as a result, the antipathy of these *samurai* toward the government strengthened even more. In the end, this antipathy became outright hatred and contempt, whereupon, eventually, these *samurai* led a successful effort to overthrow the government. In the event, nearly all of the leaders of the new government that was then established had previously been low-stratum *samurai*. Mainly, then, this was a revolution occasioned by the people in the lower stratum of the dominant hereditary status, acting out the pent-up discontent and rancor that had built up within the system of hereditary status.

As soon as the new government was established, it directly pledged to and published its basic policy in five articles (1866, the so-called “Oath in Five Articles” or “Charter Oath” [*Gokajō no Goseimon*]). The third article was “That each, from the bureaucrats and warriors down to the common people, may pursue his own resolution (*kokorozashi*); for we want that the people’s heart (*jinshin*⁴⁸) not grow weary and frustrated.” Which is to say, until now, people’s hearts *had been* weary and frustrated; however, from now on, anyone regardless of birth will be able to actualize his aspirations for the life he wishes to live. In the final analysis, this meant abolishing the system of hereditary status and actualizing “democratic society.”

The expressions may differ greatly, but the essential point is the same as that of Article VI of the French Revolution’s *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (26 August, 1789):

It [the law] must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes. All citizens, being equal in its eyes, shall be equally eligible to all high offices, public positions and employments, according to their ability, and without other distinction than that of their virtues and talents.

Elle [La loi] doit être la même pour tous, soit qu’elle protège, soit qu’elle punisse. Tous les citoyens

⁴⁷Viz., the *samurai*. The word used is *bushi*, which I hereafter translate as *samurai*. – Tr.

⁴⁸This is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese *rénxīn*; cf. p. 10. – Tr.

étant égaux à ses yeux sont également admissibles à toutes dignités, places et emplois publics, selon leur capacité, et sans autre distinction que celle de leurs vertus et de leurs talents.

As these two declarations clearly show, this “equality” is not the equality of result. “Equality” in this meaning rather includes the acknowledgment that differences in “*kokorozashi*,” in “*vertus*,” in “*talents*,” etc. bring with them their own possibilities of success in life. This means that, not being bound to the status in which they are born, the possibility is opened to attain to the position to which one aspires by means of one’s own choice and hard work. According to this meaning of “equality,” “equality” is itself the individual’s “freedom” to actualize their own talent, etc. The most influential intellectual of this new age, Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901), in effect described this new state of affairs as the actualization of “freedom,” and explained that the Meiji Revolution was a revolution for the sake of “freedom” (in his *Kokken-kabun no Setsu*, 1875).⁴⁹

In this meaning, then, the Meiji Revolution was, just as the French Revolution had been (even if one may hold any number of reservations regarding the degree of actualization), a revolution for the sake of “freedom” and “equality.”

In the second place, the new government abolished the hereditary status of local lords who had held hereditary dominion over the places of Japan. Power, furthermore, was concentrated in the central government (like in China), and the government of localities was now handed over to governors dispatched from the central government. (Actually, this step was explained and understood at the time as a reform toward the system then current in China, i.e., from a “feudal” system to a “county-prefecture” system. For this reason, the name of the new administrative units became, of course in the Chinese style, “prefectures” [Japanese: *ken*; Chinese: *xiàn*].) And the *samurai* status itself was abolished, along with the *samurai*’s privileges. The former lower-stratum *samurai*, who had accumulated such discontent toward the system of hereditary status, in the end destroyed their *own* hereditary status. For this reason, the military also changed, no longer being filled according to hereditary status, but instead becoming a “national army” based on a system of conscription. Political, administrative, and military centralization progressed quickly, at the same time as the abolition of the system of hereditary status.

And furthermore, returning to the basic policy in five articles of the new government, the first article was that “Deliberative assemblies shall be widely established, and all matters decided through public discussion.” With this article as a power source, the democratization of politics gradually progressed. Twenty-three years after the collapse of the Tokugawa regime, a parliamentary system was established;⁵⁰ the electorate was broadened bit by bit, and in 1925 the system of elections by general male suffrage was established (although, somewhat after this – well, everyone knows what happened then).

The similarity between the French Revolution as Tocqueville described it and the Meiji Revolution is obvious. This results from the fact that the societies preceding each were both similar “aristocracies.” And that both these two revolutions differ essentially from the Chinese revolution is a result of the fact that China had not been an “aristocracy,” but had rather already been a “democracy,” accompanied by a high degree of administrative centralization. The shift to “democracy” had happened in China in the tenth century; in France, it happened about eight hundred years later, and in Japan about eighty years after that.

But on the other hand, the Industrial Revolution made newly possible a great military mobilization; and this happened first in Europe (which included, of course, France). As a result, in order to respond to this new threat, first, Japan swiftly pursued a comprehensive self-transformation, and organized itself into a nation state with a national army. This move itself was a result of the fragility and instability that were built in to Japanese society specifically *because* it had not been a “democracy” (i.e., the

⁴⁹The Complete Works of Fukuzawa Yukichi, vol. XIX (Iwanami-shoten, 1962), pp. 525–38.

⁵⁰Incidentally, regarding this stage-by-stage transformation, Tsukahara Shizumu (pen name Jūshien, 1848–1917) gave the following evaluation: “In the two-thousand five-hundred and some decades of years since the Emperor Jimmu, in politics [there have been only these two changes: First,] from the feudal system [*hōken*] to the county-prefecture system [*gunken*]; and [shortly thereafter, this was changed] when the constitutional government with a parliament [*rikken*] was established. Truly this was a [period] of tremendous change.” Tsukahara Jūshien, *Bakumatsu no Edo Fūzoku* (Iwanami-shoten, 2018), p. 180.

comparative success of Japanese reform was certainly not because the Japanese were inherently smarter or more sensitive, etc., than the Chinese). And in turn, this transformed Japan then challenged China, providing a mighty stimulus to China. China, in which “democracy” had long already been actualized, stubbornly resisted self-transformation; but in the end, it could no longer endure these pressures; and in the twentieth century, it transformed its political constitution.

To Conclude

Let us summarize.

In France, society had been an aristocracy; politics had been, formally, an absolute monarchy. As a result, the democratization of society and the democratization of politics were pursued simultaneously, a simultaneous transformation of both society and politics. This was not an easy thing to do. A double-resistance occurred, due to many complex entanglements among relationships of competing interests. The result of this was that after 1789 (for at least roughly a century), French history traced a long zig-zag pattern.

In Japan, society had been an aristocracy, but politics had been organized as a federal system. There are researchers who even refer to the “United States of Tokugawa.” Moreover, the apex of the federation was formally double, with the shogunate in Edo on the one hand, and the emperor in Kyōto on the other. The Meiji Revolution first formally consolidated this system around the single apex of the emperor, and moreover destroyed the federal system (under the slogan “Destroy the domains and establish prefectures” [*hai han chi ken*]). This meant the actualization of political centralization. Concomitantly, the system of hereditary status was (mostly) abolished; this meant the promotion of the democratization of society. And subsequently, the democratization of politics in turn gradually progressed.

In China, society had long been a democracy; politics had for a very long time been (both politically and administratively) a centralized⁵¹ despotism – far *more* centralized than French “absolute” monarchy. And the people who lived within this societal democracy, because of their discontent with the imperial political system – the emperor of which, incidentally, did not actually exist, since governance had for three decades been carried out by the “court dictated through bamboo curtains” (*chuílián-tīngzhèng*) of the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908) – destroyed it. Thereupon the Chinese attempted to construct a new political system which did not have even a formal place for the emperor. But with the interference and aggressive invasions of Japan and other foreign countries, this project did not go very well; and in the end, the domination of the Communist Party was established.

Let us look at the present situation. It seems that China has once again reverted to “democratic despotism.”^{52,53} Yet today’s “democratic despotism” in China has great differences to that of early modern China. First, the “despotism” is of an even more thoroughgoing character. At the same

⁵¹Regarding French absolute monarchy, Ninomiya Hiroyuki’s “*Furansu Zettai Ōsei no Tōchi-kōzō*” contains the suggestion that “Absolute monarchy stands on a corporatist organization whose characteristics are actualized via domination through the mediation of intermediate bodies; I believe that this structure was basically unchanged until the time of the revolution ...” (in *Zentai wo Miru Me to Rekishika-tachi* (Heibonsha, 1995), p. 195). Various bodies laid claims to and possessed special privileges, which they called “liberties,” in which the king could not easily intervene; it was on this basis that the monarchy was established. However, in early modern China, there were no corporations of this kind. There were no privilege-holding intermediary bodies which both enclosed and protected individual people (secret associations had a roughly similar meaning for individual people, but of course, their existence was not officially acknowledged). The China historian Kishimoto Mio, on page 12 of the “Comment” to the book cited in this footnote, through a comparison with France, indicates that “The ‘liberty’ in the Chinese Imperial order without mediation by ‘corporations’ was inseparable from its lack of ‘liberties *qua* privileges’.”

⁵²Incidentally, Tocqueville writes as follows: “This deserves to be thought about. If a democratic republic like that of the United States ever came to be founded in a country where the power of one alone would already have established administrative centralization and made it pass into habits as into laws, I do not fear to say, in a republic like this, despotism would become more intolerable than in any of the absolute monarchies of Europe. One would have to cross over to Asia to find something to compare to it” (*Democracy in America*, I.II.8, “On What Tempers the Tyranny of the Majority in the United States”). In the *Pléiade*, p. 3012; in *M/W*, p. 251.

⁵³In this connection, it may be of interest that the Chinese Communist Party describes its government as a “people’s democratic dictatorship” (*rénmín mínzhǔzhūānzhèng*) – see Article I of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of

time, secondly, the broadly open system used to select political leadership and high-level bureaucrats, the Imperial Examinations, no longer exists.

Above, I have presented a group of hypotheses for the comparison of three revolutions, using Tocqueville's theory of "democracy" as a key. In this, I have departed from the frequently held view of history by which "modernity" (*la modernité*) conceived of as a unity was actualized first in Europe, and then came East, actualizing itself in the order "Japan, China." By means of the route we have taken, the understanding we reach of the meaning of these three revolutions also greatly differs.

Perhaps history, just as Tocqueville hints, is more complicated and is richer with surprises than commonly held notions would have us believe.

China; cf. also Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, vol. I (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2018, pp. 19, n. 7, 153). But this "dictatorship" is supposed to be the dictatorship *by* the people. – Tr.