

“New Year’s Dream”

A Chinese Anarcho-cosmopolitan Utopia

Guangyi Li

2013

Contents

Abstract	3
A Revolutionary Narrative	3
Spatiotemporal Framework and Power Relations	5
Socialist State and Revolutionary Violence	8
Anarcho-communism and Pax Sinica	10
Conclusion	12
<i>Notes</i>	13

Abstract

This article is an in-depth analysis of “New Year’s Dream” (1904), a utopian story by Cai Yuanpei, one of the most prominent Chinese intellectuals in the twentieth century. In combination with the story’s late Qing milieu, it explores how Cai Yuanpei maps his contemporary world and designs a better one. Based on detailed discussions of the linear progressive future history in the story, this article values “New Year’s Dream” for its landmark importance in the transition of Chinese utopian thought and critically analyzes its theme of dual revolution—a national revolution leading to a world revolution, which is significant for our understanding of world utopianism and anarchism.

The revolution has not yet succeeded. Comrades, carry on!

—Sun Yat-sen, “Political Testament” (1925)

On February 17, 1904, one month after the Russo-Japanese War broke out in northeastern China (Manchuria), Cai Yuanpei,¹ a prominent Chinese intellectual, began to publish his short story “Xinnian meng” (New Year’s dream) in *Eshi jingwen* (Alarming news about Russia), a daily based in Shanghai.² In this piece, Cai depicts his dream of a future world where humans ultimately achieve universal freedom and affluence. The contemporary scholar Arif Dirlik praised Cai Yuanpei’s creativity, regarding “New Year’s Dream” as worthy of inclusion in an “anarchist canon.”³ Cai Yuanpei, although a prestigious scholar and educator and the most famous chancellor of Beijing University, was by no means a prolific writer. Indeed, “New Year’s Dream” is the only fictional work he ever wrote. Why, then, did he write this story at this very moment? What might the author’s thinking have had to do with his social and intellectual milieu? How did he envisage a better world? And how did Cai Yuanpei break new ground for anarchism? Based on a detailed survey of the text, I will argue that “New Year’s Dream” epitomizes an age of transition: deep-rooted in the long tradition of Chinese thought, the story reflects a world system epicentered in China while also foreshadowing the distinct twentieth-century Chinese utopian passion.

A Revolutionary Narrative

In the final decade of the Qing dynasty (1901–11), Cai Yuanpei was first and foremost a revolutionary. For some time he was even a zealous learner of assassination skills, in the hope that

¹ For a general introduction to Cai Yuanpei, see Eugene S. Lubot, “Ts’ai Yuan-P’ei from Confucian Scholar to Chancellor of Peking University, 1868–1923: The Evolution of a Patient Reformer” (Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University, 1970).

² Cai Yuanpei, “Xinnian meng” [New Year’s dream], *Eshi jingwen* [Alarming news about Russia], February 17–20 and 24–25, 1904; also available in *Cai Yuanpei quanji*, vol. 1, ed. Cai Yuanpei Research Society of China (Hangzhou: Zhejiang jiaoyu chubanshe, 1991), 422–36. All quotations are cited from the Cai Yuanpei Research Society of China edition and are my translation.

³ Arif Dirlik, *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 67.

one day, like many partisans, he might eliminate the conservative officials.⁴ His major work, however, was cultivating progressive students in schools such as the Aiguo xueshe (Patriotic Study Society) and writing editorials to spread revolutionary ideas. “New Year’s Dream,” like the articles Cai wrote to warn his readers against the ambitions of Russia for Manchuria, was part of this revolutionary practice.

The humiliation of Qing China’s fiasco in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) forced the Chinese elites to seek new ways to save their country. Fiction henceforth received much attention for its alleged function in social enlightenment. However, many argued, the “old fiction” was such a lowbrow form of entertainment that it would be very unlikely to convey new ideas to its readers.⁵ Liang Qichao, a leading intellectual at the turn of the century, thus called for a revolution in fiction in 1902, holding the belief that new fiction could renovate the people’s mind over time and eventually foster the new citizens necessary for a modern nation.⁶ “Today to reform the politics,”

Liang wrote, “we should begin with a revolution of fiction; to renovate the people, we should begin with the renovation of fiction.”⁷ Many scholars and writers ardently echoed Liang’s words, and the last years of the Qing Empire therefore witnessed an unprecedented boom of fiction writing, mostly in Shanghai.

Early in the 1890s, Liang and his teacher Kang Youwei, another leading thinker, extolled Edward Bellamy’s utopian novel, *Looking Backward, 2000–1887*. From their point of view, the Confucian ideal depicted in the ancient classic *Liji* (Book of rites) was realized in Bellamy’s future Boston.⁸ Later, during his exile in Japan, Liang Qichao was exposed to future stories by Meiji Japanese writers, the influence of which is manifest in his own utopian work, “Xin Zhongguo weilaiji” (A story of future new China), which inaugurated the literary imagination of a powerful and flourishing new China.⁹

Many utopian stories emerged in the following years, indicating people’s longing for a strengthened China. “New Year’s Dream” is Cai’s only work in this tide of utopian narratives aroused by Liang. It is of particular importance for several reasons. First, it is among the earliest works that enthusiastically resonated with Liang’s fantasy. Second, although structurally similar to *Looking Backward*, “New Year’s Dream” contains significant heterogeneities. For

⁴ Hu Guoshu, *Cai Yuanpei pingzhuan* (Zhengzhou: Henan jiaoyu chubanshe, 1990), 71–74.

⁵ For a sketch of late Qing literature, see Leo Ou-Fan Lee, “Literary Trends I: The Quest for Modernity, 1895–1927,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 12, ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 452–504.

⁶ See Theodore Hutner, *Bringing the World Home: Approaching the West in Late Qing and Early Republican China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), chap. 4. For a case study of the new media’s significance for late Qing social enlightenment, see Joan Judge, *Print and Politics: “Shibao” and the Culture of Reform in Late Qing China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 1–13, 100–119.

⁷ Liang Qichao, “Lun xiaoshuo yu qunzhi zhi guanxi” (1902), in *Ershi shiji zhongguo xiaoshuo lilun ziliao*, vol. 1, ed. Chen Pingyuan and Xia Xiaohong (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1989), 37.

⁸ See the description of *datong* (Great Unity) in the *Book of Rites. The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Confucianism*, pt. 3, trans. James Legge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), 364–66. For Liang and Kang’s comments on Bellamy’s utopian novel, see Liang Qichao, “Xixue dushu fa,” quoted in Zou Zhenhuan, *Yingxiang zhongguo jindai shehui de yibai zhong yizuo* (Beijing: China Translation and Publishing, 1996), 100; Kang Nanhai *xiansheng koushuo*, comp. and ed. Wu Xizhao and Deng Zhonghao (Guangzhou: Zhongshan daxue chubanshe, 1985), 31.

⁹ Meiji Japanese future stories’ influence upon Liang’s utopia is evident: to name but a few, the story’s title, constant dialogue, and reversed narrative structure. See Chen Pingyuan, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo xushi moshi de zhuanbian* (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2004), 40–43.

instance, in sharp contrast to Bellamy's all too happy eulogy of the perfect society, much of Cai's piece centers upon the painful, even violent, struggle before a bright future can be attained. Third, unique among late Qing fiction, "New Year's Dream" offers a comprehensive account of world revolution, which resonates uncannily with later revolutionary discourses and movements over the course of China's turbulent twentieth century. It is precisely this last point that invites me to explore Cai's daring utopia.

Cai Yuanpei has nicely incorporated his own life experiences into the plotline. The story starts with "Congratulations! Congratulations! It's a new year, and also a new world!" followed by a flashback to the protagonist's early life. The protagonist, who calls himself "a Chinese citizen" (*zhongguo yimin*), is born into a well-educated and "rich Jiangnan family." Apart from traditional learning, he is also fond of engineering. At the age of sixteen, he leaves home for treaty ports, where he learns foreign languages. This young man then roams about the world. Inasmuch as he values equality and freedom, he first goes to the United States and France. Later he travels to Germany to study industry and philosophy, where he makes friends with Russian populists. His trip after graduation begins in Britain and ends in Russia. Back in China, the protagonist conducts a thorough investigation of his home country.

All these experiences, especially his family ties and knowledge structure, tell us that the hero is actually a progressive Chinese elite intellectual of the day. Most pro-revolution or pro-reform intellectuals were from coastal provinces, where they readily encountered colonial effects and Western learning.¹⁰ By means of the study of language, technology, and philosophy, they absorbed Western culture. The hero's global journey, which Cai Yuanpei himself had yet to carry out, implies his accumulation of knowledge and experience concerning the West over the past decades. Meanwhile, the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform in 1898 and subsequent suppression of progressive intellectuals and officials destroyed many people's confidence in the Qing government. Only against this historical backdrop can we understand why Cai Yuanpei, a top-rank scholar-official, supposedly a guardian of law and order, became a steadfast revolutionary.¹¹

The revolutionary significance of "New Year's Dream" is thus manifold. Not only does it reflect Cai Yuanpei's personal revolutionary trajectory, but the story, written in vernacular Chinese on the serious theme of national salvation and world revolution, also offers a forceful response to Liang Qichao's call for a revolution in fiction. Its linear progressive account of future history was hardly available in earlier Chinese literature. More important, it articulates a blueprint for dual revolution: a national revolution for China's revival is to be followed by a world revolution, which results in a thoroughgoing reconstruction of the entire world system.

Spatiotemporal Framework and Power Relations

"Human beings cannot yet overcome Nature," Cai writes, continuing: "Things like disease, flood, and drought are still unavoidable. This is because the Earth is divided into many countries, and each fights for its own benefit. The strength of human beings is wasted in the intercourses between the countries. A country that cannot prevail over other countries suffers from either

¹⁰ Cai Yuanpei was born and raised in a rich business family based in Shaoxing, a city some one hundred miles away from Shanghai.

¹¹ Cai Yuanpei had served for four years in the Hanlin Academy (the top official academic institution of Qing China) until he left for home in 1898.

losses of land or cessions of rights. [That such a country fails] is precisely because it is again divided into many families, and each fights for its own benefit, thereby wasting all its strength.”¹² In this compassionate tone, the hero states the common predicament of humans. His Chinese identity notwithstanding, what is put into question is not merely the situation of China. Rather, the fundamental way by which humans organize their civilization is doubted. Nation and family, the basic categories of a person’s political and personal life, are both problematic in the author’s eyes.

While a world perspective is evinced in many late Qing utopian writings, few provide such a general critique of human civilization. Among those that do cast doubt upon the whole world, “New Year’s Dream” is the most impressive, anticipating the world’s grand transformation over time. This feature has everything to do with Cai’s advocacy of anarchism. In his autobiography, Cai admits that he wrote this story to valorize anarchism.¹³ Anarchism is opposed to any kind of oppression, be it nation, family, or other social formations.

These oppressive structures, anarchism argues, unfortunately, exist every-where. On this account, no country is exempt from critique, and humans need to reform their civilization by voluntary mutual aid, like Kropotkin calls for in his works.¹⁴ Therefore, though focusing on China as well, Cai Yuanpei differs from many peer utopian writers in that he evidently sees the revolution in China as part of a worldwide revolution to reorganize and ameliorate human civilization in general.

Cai’s story offers a panorama of the post-Westphalian world, consisting of competing nation-states. This state form, or *guo*, is of crucial importance for the welfare of human beings. He writes:

Nowadays, people in the most civilized states still exhaust half of their strength upon their states and the other half upon their families. Actually they do not have a complete state yet. How can they talk about cosmopolitanism! First we should allow those who do not have a state to carefully build one. Currently, both the Slavic and Chinese peoples have families rather than states. The Slavic people’s [efforts to] build their state are increasing day by day, while for Chinese people, few are thinking of such matters. But everyday they claim to be Chinese. How shameless the Chinese people are! In fact, if everyone were to devote his strength wasted on the family to the public, there would be no difficulty in building a new China!¹⁵

This passage abounds with interesting points. To begin with, we have “the most civilized states” in the picture. Which states does he mean? Obviously, they are the Euro-American powers through which the hero travels. Following China’s debacle in the First Opium War (1839–42), Chinese intellectuals were always painstakingly comparing Chinese and Western civilizations.¹⁶ At the turn of the century, after a succession of failures, a great many of them were willing to acknowledge the overwhelming supremacy of the imperialists. In the eyes of many late Qing revolutionaries, the Western powers were more civilized than China, whose own civilization had lasted for thousands of years. Nevertheless, Cai acutely pointed out that they were far from

¹² Cai, “New Year’s Dream,” 423.

¹³ Yang Yang, ed., *Zishu yu yinxiang: Cai Yuanpei* (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 1997), 9.

¹⁴ For a general account of anarchism and its modern development in China, see Dirlik, *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*, chap. 1.

¹⁵ Cai, “New Year’s Dream,” 423.

¹⁶ For their early debates, see Hutters, *Bringing the World Home*, chap. 1.

perfect. In criticizing these “most civilized states,” he adopted the ideas of European anarchists, taking the state and the family as two major targets.

Given such forthright critique, Cai has no passion for immediate utopias. If “a complete state” has yet to be achieved, it is definitely too early to talk about cosmopolitanism. Cai thereby diverges from the European anarchist orthodoxy: For most European anarchists, there was no need to “complete” the current nation-states; instead, they could be superseded by the new forms for which anarchists called, for instance, communes based upon the principle of mutual aid.¹⁷ One reason for the difference between Cai and his European comrades lies in his primary concern for China. From describing those who lack complete states, Cai turns abruptly to the problem of those who have no states at all, explicitly singling out the Slavic and Chinese peoples. Without the “Slavic and Chinese peoples” in the next sentence, one might well con-fuse their plight, that is, lacking a state (*meiyou chengguo*), with the problem of people in the most civilized states, that is, lacking a complete state (*meiyou wanquan de guo*). Arguing for the priority of state formation in the less civilized world, Cai offers a dialectical response to the ideal pursued by anarchists in the European center. To be exact, although favoring anarchism, he foregrounds the imbalances of the capitalist world system and asserts a Chinese subjectivity by justifying their need for a state. The work of Peter Zarrow has pointed out that another prominent anarchist in 1900s China, Liu Shippei, predated Lenin in revealing the key importance of liberation struggles in the peripheries.¹⁸ “New Year’s Dream,” I argue, is an even earlier example of Chinese anarchists’ insight into the world system.

To better understand Cai Yuanpei’s vision of the future, we also have to take into account the intellectual tradition of China. Like most contemporary scholars, Cai was first exposed to Darwinian evolutionary theory thanks to Yan Fu’s Chinese translation of T. H. Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics*.¹⁹

Cai, also akin to his contemporaries such as Kang Youwei, invoked the historical view in the *Gongyang Commentaries* to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, a central Confucian classic, to interpret evolutionary theory.²⁰ In common with Kang, who offered a utopian reinterpretation of the “Three Ages” of historical development posited in the *Gongyang Commentaries*, Cai suggested a gradual, three-stage improvement of society, with the people’s identity shifting from family members (*jiaren*) to state citizens (*guoren*) and finally to cosmopolitan citizens (*shijieren*).²¹ However, one can draw a clear distinction between Cai and Kang, for the former avidly embraced rev-

¹⁷ Daniel Guérin, *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 14–17, 57–60.

¹⁸ “[Liu] strikingly foreshadowed Lenin’s notion that liberation struggles in the colonies were a part of revolution in the metropole. Indeed, he went beyond Lenin in locating the key to revolutionary endeavor in the peripheries. Thus the Chinese anarchists not only began the process of the sinification of Marxism, but independently reached conclusions similar to those of European Marxists” (Peter Zarrow, *Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1990], 174–75).

¹⁹ See Benjamin Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), chap. 4.

²⁰ Yang, *Zishu yu yinxiang*, 4–5. For Kang Youwei’s reference to the *Gongyang Commentaries*, see Hsiao Kung-Chuan, *A Modern China and a New World: K’ang Yu-wei, Reformer and Utopian, 1858–1927* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), 54–57.

²¹ The *Gongyang Commentaries* is among the canons of a long suppressed Confucian school, New Text Confucianism. While employed to justify evolutionism, New Text Confucianism was also reinvigorated by the former. For the revival of New Text Confucianism in the mid–eighteenth century, see Benjamin A. Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship: The Ch’ang-chou School of New Text Confucianism in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

olution, while the latter strived for a peaceful shift to constitutional monarchy.²² Cai Yuanpei insisted that history follows a certain evolutionary process, in which no society can cut corners, and yet he also believed that revolution was indispensable for each stage of transition.

Albeit successfully calling attention to the oppressed China, Cai Yuanpei's world vision is still incomplete, for he neglects the suffering of many other countries around the globe. Present in his picture are the Euro-American powers, plus Japan. Meanwhile, China and the Slavic people, part of Europe, are presented as the oppressed. If Japan, the promising latecomer calling for breaking away from Asia and joining Europe, can be taken as a member of the Western club, Cai Yuanpei's world is actually composed of just two sides, China and the West. Where is the agency of other Asian countries, for instance, Korea, Vietnam, and India, which were under substantial colonial rule? Where are the people suffering from the "Scramble for Africa" by the Western imperialist countries? Where is Latin America, the United States' so-called backyard? At this moment Cai Yuanpei was by no means unaware of these other flashpoints of struggle for national determination. In his world, however, whether present or future, these countries are totally left out of the scene. To comprehend Cai's negligence, one has to remember that China had been an empire throughout most of its history. Even overwhelmed by the Western powers, Chinese intellectuals were still unwilling to identify China as coeval with other victims of colonialism.²³ Rather, many of them easily assumed a China/West dichotomy when reflecting upon their national crisis and in response, then imagined a new hierarchy restoring China's supremacy as the most advanced civilization.²⁴ Despite his occasional mention of China's fellow victims, Cai was not exempt from traditional Sinocentrism, which renders his utopian story problematic.

Socialist State and Revolutionary Violence

In spite of his call for the formation of a nation-state, Cai has no intention of building a capitalist state. Rather, he desires its socialist variant. Like many utopian travelers, the hero enters into the new era by means of dream. He is awakened by the ringing of a bell, which leads him to a grand conference room where people from all over the country come to discuss how to change China. The keynote speaker says: "All of us here are called Chinese. But how do we deserve this name? We definitely have a China in our mind, yet if we don't substantially build a state now, I'm afraid we will never have a chance!"²⁵

Thus Cai differed from fellow anarchists in that, for him, protecting China from invasion was his immediate point of departure. There are various oppressions in this world. Major anarchists in the last half of the 1900s were more concerned with the oppressions imposed upon workers, peasants, and other commoners by states. Despite their pan-European cooperation and some leaders' critique of colonialism, hardly any effort was directed toward decolonization.²⁶ In con-

²² For a detailed account of the early introduction of anarchism in China and Cai's reception, see Jiang Jun and Li Xingzhi, *Zhongguo jindai de wuzhengfuzhuyi sichao* (Jinan: Shandong renmin chubanshe, 1990), 17–29.

²³ See Rebecca E. Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

²⁴ After the Second Opium War (1856–60), there came a bitter debate on whether Western technology is from China, whether the West is entirely the opposite of China, and whether Chinese learning is for fundamental principles while Western learning is for practical application. See Hutters's discussion in *Bringing the World Home*, chap. 1.

²⁵ Cai, "New Year's Dream," 424.

²⁶ Guérin, *Anarchism*, 66–69.

trast, Cai Yuanpei's first care was the colonial oppression China suffered in the world arena. To fight off the Western countries, Cai maintained, China first required the political and economic power of a modern state. Social reform was necessary, but it should serve the paramount political end. Put another way, social revolution, the focus of most anarchists, gave way in Cai's vision to political revolution.

What Cai Yuanpei proposes for the first phase of revolution is a socialist state with a strong central government. In his futuristic China, people are to elect their representatives, who hold meetings to decide national policies.

The economy is completely state-owned, running well-planned, noncompetitive social production and fair allocation and ensuring everyone a proper job, from each according to his ability and to each according to his work. Every person is to receive education from seven to twenty-four years of age, to work from twenty-four to forty-eight, and then to retire. Every day, one is to spend eight hours working, eight hours sleeping, and another eight hours taking meals, talking, and enjoying leisure time. The state provides public facilities including schools, parks, libraries, and so on. There is a system to care for the children, the aged, and those with disabilities. Up to this point, Cai was apparently invoking Bellamy, who had inspired most late Qing utopians. Certain notable facilities, for example, public bedrooms (*gonggong qinshi*) and mating rooms (*nannü pei'ou shi*), nevertheless reveal Cai Yuanpei's anarchist mind.

Had Bellamy been able to read "New Year's Dream," Cai's relentless enforcement of revolutionary justice might have astonished him. To achieve a socialist state, the state machine, as well as capital, has to be owned by the public. More to the point, citizens in this new state have to be, at least to a certain degree, altruistic. This is what Cai has in common with Bellamy.

Yet, according to most theories of socialism and anarchism, the old society is based upon private ownership of property, thus making its members self-ish. In what way can the necessary transformation happen? While Bellamy called for peaceful reform, most early Chinese anarchists, mainly exposed to Russian nihilism, were in favor of violence, especially assassination.²⁷ Cai Yuanpei also regarded violence as an effective means to realize the revolutionary ideal. In his story, a sort of populist, tyrannical democracy is preferred:

Now to do anything the majority will force the minority to obey. If someone obstructs the public enterprise for his own benefit, he will be our public enemy. It was well said by the ancients that "it's better to sacrifice a few for the benefit of the majority." We have but to be ruthless... Only a few wealthy people who once falsely claimed the state lose their minds. People strive to comfort and prevent them (from doing mad things), but they don't care. Then they are found guilty in the local parliament. Once the court also sentences a person to condemnation, it will be declared in public that he is to be executed for his crime. Immediately this person is electrocuted by a sudden bolt of lightning, with the condemnation imprinted on his body, just like the legendary Thunder God's strike... The opposition parties, even in empty houses, dare not to speak and live in fear.²⁸

²⁷ Hu Qingyun, *Zhongguo wuzhengfuzhuyi sixiangshi* (Beijing: Guofang daxue chubanshe, 1994), 44.

²⁸ Cai, "New Year's Dream," 427, 431. Herein Cai Yuanpei quotes a famous Song dynasty politician, Fan Zhongyan (989–1052). Fan spoke the sentence when advised that he should be lenient to corrupt officials. What he literally said is, "How can a weeping family be compared to a weeping province!"

Cai Yuanpei celebrates the effect of brutal violence with an ironic comment that “[the opposition parties] are reformed [*ganhua*] quickly. In fewer than one year national unity is accomplished.”²⁹ In the meantime, rich people’s money, whether hidden in their homes or deposited in foreign banks, is confiscated for public cause.

All these efforts create a powerful state, which in no time has to defend itself. If Cai Yuanpei were to justify his imaginary use of violence and state-building, he might call attention to the very real threat of colonial powers. He might also agree with Franz Fanon that “decolonization is always a violent event.”³⁰ Cai Yuanpei anticipates a war between the new China and the powers that are unwilling to lose their control over China. Interestingly, in Cai’s vision, Russia and the United States decide to recognize the new state, because the former has experienced similar sufferings and now operates with a similar set of institutions, while the latter has the highest respect for civil rights.

The armies sent to fight against China come from Korea, India, and Vietnam, suggesting that Japan, Britain, and France are the major enemies of the new China. The defending country, though, is no longer a weak, disintegrated China. A vital change, Cai says, has transpired in Chinese peoples’ minds so that now “they take China as their own soul.”³¹ Thanks to this flame of patriot-ism, plus a slight technical advantage, China manages to defeat the invading troops and thence reclaims all the foreign concessions.

Finally, the nation-state topic surfaces. National spirit is regarded as the decisive factor in the competition among countries. All China’s internal reforms, including the lessening of provincial division, the endeavor to raise public benefit, and the abolition of private property, serve to create a strong, unified nation-state. Meanwhile, the social enlightenment accomplished through literature and the performing arts,³² and “New Year’s Dream” per se, exemplifies the formation of a powerful “imagined community.”³³

Anarcho-communism and Pax Sinica

The first half of the twentieth century was witness to much of Cai Yuanpei’s predictive vision. China, through incessant wars and movements, some of which were very bloody, won its full independence as a socialist nation-state.

We should keep this correspondence in mind as we read the magnificent climax of Cai Yuanpei’s utopian composition: anarcho-communism.

After the war, the defeated powers hold a conference in Berlin, concluding that it is better to have peace with China and benefit from reciprocal trade.

China, on the other hand, takes this opportunity to raise a way to eliminate wars of all kinds:

We suggest that all the countries collaborate to establish a world public law court, and train several legions of a single world army. The number of judges and the constituency of the army are to be decided based upon the population of the countries.

²⁹ Ibid., 432.

³⁰ Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 1.

³¹ Cai, “New Year’s Dream,” 433.

³² Ibid., 431.

³³ See Benedict Anderson’s analysis of print culture’s role in the development of nationalism in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

Except for internal police forces, no one country is allowed to establish its own army. Any conflict between two countries is to be brought before the court for settlement. Those who refuse to obey the judgment will come under the attack of the world army. In addition, if a citizen of a certain country cannot settle a dispute between the state and himself, he can also turn to the world court.³⁴

One can easily find an affinity between Cai's world court and the League of Nations, indicating that Chinese thinkers preceded Woodrow Wilson in suggesting an international organization for *global* collective security.³⁵ Under the regulation of the world court, Cai imagines, eternal peace becomes possible. Human beings channel all their efforts to enhance social welfare, thus changing society fundamentally. There are no monarchs and subjects. Each person works earnestly and regularly. No distinction is made between fathers and sons. Proper institutions are available for the children, old people, and people with disabilities. The categories of husband and wife are eliminated.

Once two people fall in love with each other, they go to the mating rooms (to have sex). Even names are abolished, and each person is assigned a number.

Before long, since no one breaks the law anymore, laws and courts are both abrogated. New culture is first manifested in the language. A new kind of written characters (*xinzi*) is created, which can indicate the sounds and the meaning of language at the same time, thus making the system easy to learn.

Due to this benefit, and also because of the consistency between writing and speaking, people all over the world happily learn the new language. "From words to thought, then from thought to practice," in fewer than sixty years, new practices prevail throughout the whole world.³⁶ People then decide to hold a conference in order to abolish the states, the world court, and the world army, for they are no longer of any use. Instead, humans form an association for overcoming Nature (*shengziran hui*). There are no more disputes among the people; rather, what people now strive to do is to fight with Nature. Humankind will put the climate under their rule and harness the air to (fly to and) colonize the planets. This is "the true end of Earth people's competitive mind."³⁷

As an anarchist, in his fantasy Cai Yuanpei unsurprisingly chooses to surpass the world system of nation-states. For him and like-minded anarchists, states and families are the major sources of oppression, without the abolition of which a new era will never come. However, the abolition of these basic social categories signifies a thoroughgoing revolution, which for many is open to question. It is reasonable for one to doubt: How can new institutions and new culture be established peacefully and smoothly? Reading the story "New Year's Dream," a person suspicious of human nature might raise a further question: If violence is applicable in domestic revolution and world war, how is it possible to avoid the abuse of violence by someone or some organization? Due to all these doubts, utopian designs are assigned extremely negative significance in the dystopias produced decades later. For instance, the replacement of names by numbers is terrifying in Zamiyatin's *We*, as it actually puts people under the firm control of authority. Another case

³⁴ Cai, "New Year's Dream," 434.

³⁵ Kang Youwei also developed his blueprint for world government and perpetual peace. See *Ta T'ung Shu: The One-World Philosophy of K'ang Yu-Wei*, trans. Laurence G. Thompson (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1958).

³⁶ Cai, "New Year's Dream," 435.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

in point is seen in the realm of language. In “New Year’s Dream,” the new language is established to bridge the gap between different cultures, whereas George Orwell’s “Newspeak” only plays the role of eliminating any ideas inconsistent with the totalitarian government.

The part China plays in the remaking of the world order seems to be Cai Yuanpei’s answer to the aforementioned questions, although it certainly adds to the uneasiness of readers. In the beginning of “New Year’s Dream,” the reform or revolution for which the hero calls is supposed to be a change happening in the world’s periphery. However, by putting the correct social thought into effect, in a short time China regains the central position it had assumed for so long in earlier times. It is China that proposes all the new principles to form a better world. In response to the suggestion of China, “at that time the words of China sound like heavenly speech [*tianyu*] for other countries. Since Russia and the United States also come to her aid, no country dares to disobey. After the treaty is confirmed, all the countries soon act accordingly.”³⁸

In the subsequent years, all the other countries remodel themselves after China’s fashion. Almost the whole world voluntarily emulates China, the purported center of world revolution.³⁹ We have to ask, though, why revolution goes so smoothly in the West. Considering the frantic resistance that rich Chinese people put up in the story, why do we not see the same resistance in Western countries? Moreover, struggles in other peripheral areas are totally missing, as if Western colonizers would willingly give up their privileges or the colonies and their suzerains would realize anarchist bliss at the same pace.

What Cai Yuanpei has in his mind, in my opinion, is a Confucian confidence that assumes China as the moral center: “If such a state of affairs exists, yet the people of far-off lands still do not submit, then the ruler must attract them by enhancing the prestige of his culture; and when they have been duly attracted, he contents them. And where there is contentment there will be no upheavals.”⁴⁰ Cherishing men from afar and reforming them through culture is none other than the underlying doctrine of the tributary system that China maintained throughout most of its premodern era.⁴¹ Cai Yuanpei, though advocating a Western ideology, manages to integrate the traditional worldview of China within his anarchist scheme. While enriching anarchism by foregrounding its cosmopolitan dimension, his cultural arrogance is none-the-less evident.

Conclusion

“New Year’s Dream” is Cai Yuanpei’s singular contribution to anarchism. On the one hand, Cai Yuanpei offers a concise yet complete—in time and in space—delineation of the universal realization of anarchism, arguing for the necessity of a dual revolution and thus endowing anarchism with a true sense of world revolution. On the other hand, in terms of political practice, the story encompasses complexities that surpassed the simple and immediate expectations of many

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 434.

³⁹ Occasionally, revolution is intentionally transplanted to other countries. For example, before the world war the protagonist is sent to Russia to “mobilize their populists,” who consequently take over the country (*ibid.*, 432).

⁴⁰ *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. and annotated by Arthur Waley (1938; London: Routledge, 2005), 203.

⁴¹ For two rather different, even contrasting overviews of the tributary system, see J.K. Fairbank, “Tributary Trade and China’s Relations with the West,” *Far Eastern Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1942): 129–49; and Takeshi Hamashita, “The Tributary Trade System and Modern Asia,” in *Japanese Industrialization and the Asian Economy*, ed. A. J. H. Latham and Heita Kawakatsu (London: Routledge, 1994), 91–107. For a discussion of the significance and practice of the tributary system’s culture-ritual institution, see James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 9–25, 116–33.

European anarchists. To examine the interweaving power relations in “New Year’s Dream,” we have to take into account the author’s training in the Chinese scholarly tradition, his entanglement with authority, and his participation in nationalistic revolution. First of all, though, it is worth inquiring what “China” means to Cai Yuanpei. Though he asserts that Chinese people “do not have a state,” by *state* he means a modern nation-state. If we interpret *state* as a sovereign political entity, in Cai’s time China did have a state. More to the point, this state was in fact an empire, extending from the South China Sea to Central Asia. Modern China inherited and maintained most of the territory of the Qing Empire, thereupon wrestling with its power intricacies: peripheral minorities, border disputes, and the tributary system, to name but a few.

Looming over all the late Qing utopians, even their successors throughout the century, is just such an empire, from which utopians derive insights as well as prejudices. Indeed, the question of “empire in our mind” can also be raised in interrogating mainstream anarchists of Cai’s time, whose Eurocentrism prevented them from substantially addressing colonialism. In this sense, “New Year’s Dream” sheds new light on “oppression,” a central concern of anarchism. Cai Yuanpei surprisingly anticipated the outgrowth of the Chinese revolution, and yet many issues he put forward, especially the imbalances of the world and regional systems, remain unresolved. His thought experiment, a fascinating blend of anarchism, cosmopolitanism, and social evolutionism, should be inspiring for all those persistently seeking social equality and global justice.

Notes

This article is an extended version of a discussion paper presented at the Third Annual China Undisciplined Conference at the University of California, Los Angeles, in May 2010 and again at the Thirty-Fifth Annual Meeting of the Society for Utopian Studies in Milwaukee in October 2010. I am greatly indebted to Andrea S. Goldman, who offered generous help in revising this article.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Guangyi Li
“New Year’s Dream”
A Chinese Anarcho-cosmopolitan Utopia
2013

Retrieved on 15th April 2021 from www.jstor.org
Published in *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2013), pp. 89–104

theanarchistlibrary.org