

Swiss Enchantment: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and a Federal Utopia

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Abstract

A vast and hyper-centralized Asian empire built on the premise of an alleged cultural homogeneity. A small, federalist Alpine state sustained by the ideal of coexistence of different languages and religions. The differences between China and Switzerland could not be wider, and it is therefore understandable that the Swiss confederacy has been fascinating Chinese intellectuals in both the modern and contemporary era. In the late Qing and early Republican period, Switzerland was mentioned by prominent figures like Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, who praised its democracy, and in the 1920s the Swiss political system became a source of inspiration for “provincial patriots” in Hunan or for Chinese federalists such as Chen Jiongming. The present paper intends to survey these political encounters and perceptions, focusing on the transformation of the Swiss institutional model and historical experience into a “political concept”, and on the reasons for its final rejection as an unrealistic utopia unsuited for China.

Keywords: Chinese federalism, utopia, China and Switzerland, Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Chen Jiongming.

Navdušenje nad Švico: sodobni kitajski intelektualci in federalistična utopija Izvilleček

Ogromno in močno centralizirano azijsko cesarstvo je zgrajeno na predpostavki domnevne kulturne homogenosti, majhna, federalistična alpska država pa vztraja pri idealu sožitja različnih jezikov in religij. Razlike med Kitajsko in Švico ne bi mogle biti večje, zato je razumljivo, da je švicarska konfederacija kitajske intelektualce navduševala tako v modernem kot sodobnem času. V poznem obdobju dinastije Qing in zgodnjem republikanskem obdobju so Švico omenjale ugledne osebnosti, kot sta bila Kang Youwei in Liang Qichao, ki so hvalile njeno demokracijo, v dvajsetih letih pa je švicarski politični sistem postal vir navdiha za »provincialne domoljube« v Hunanu in kitajske federaliste, kot je Chen Jiongming. Pričujoči prispevek namerava raziskati ta politična soočanja in predstave s poudarkom na preoblikovanju tega švicarskega institucionalnega modela in zgodovinske izkušnje v »politični koncept« ter na razlogih za njegovo dokončno zavrnitev kot nerealistične utopije, neprimerne za Kitajsko.

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Ključne besede: kitajski federalizem, utopija, Kitajska in Švica, Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Chen Jiongming

Introduction: Confucius in Switzerland

In 2010 the Chinese journal *Bijiaofa yanjiu* 比较法研究 (*Comparative Law*) published a paper entitled “Royal is not Necessarily Big: Common Values between China and the West through a Survey of Swiss Federalism (*Wang bu bi da: cong Ruishi lianbangzhi taolun zhongxi gongtong de jiazhi guan* 王不必大：从瑞士联邦制讨论中西共同的价值观)”. Its author, Su Yigong 苏亦工 (1962–)—who two years earlier had been a guest at the University of Fribourg presenting a lecture on Swiss federalism “from the perspective of Confucianism”—argues that the institutional and political mechanism of the Alpine confederacy seems to reflect many of the Confucian prescriptions on “good government”. More specifically, according to Su, the Swiss system is a rare embodiment of the “kingly way” (*wangdao* 王道) as opposed to the ruthless “autocratic way” (*badao* 霸道), or “way of the hegemon” (Su 2010). The latter, implying concentration of power in one man, with an extensive use of violence and constriction, was traditionally associated with the short-lived Qin dynasty, but often extended to define any tyrannical figure censored by the Confucian orthodox historiography.¹

Mixing classical quotations—from the *Lunyu* 论语, the *Daxue* 大学, the *Mengzi* 孟子 (especially with regard to its well-known theory of “the people as the fundament” (民本 *minben*)), or from the Song scholar Zhang Jiucheng 張九成 (1092–1159)²—with descriptions of the Swiss institutional arrangement and of its practices, Su Yigong portrays the confederation as the almost utopian realization of a harmonious polity based on consensus and local self-government. He writes

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- 1 As Sumner Twiss and Jonathan Chan observe, “given the misuse to which the system of lords-protector (*ba*) was put—that is, its devolution into aggressive hegemony relying on military force—both Mencius and Xunzi clearly think that a more legitimate and virtuous authority is needed to use properly such a powerful tool of statecraft” (Twiss and Chan 2012). However, under a careful observation the *Xunzi* seems to provide a more nuanced view on the issue, looking at the *badao* as a historical necessity (often leading to “decent” political experiences), rather than as a moral abomination. (See also Kim 2013, and Harris 2017)
 - 2 Besides reflecting on the *minben* theory, Zhang Jiucheng also rearticulated the aforementioned relationship between *wangdao* and *badao* as a neatly binary opposition between good and bad governance.

Switzerland is one of the few countries in the world that still make an extensive use of direct democracy. But where does the essence of its democracy reside? From a Confucian point of view, it is not in the fact that it is governed by many people, but in the fact that it does not need to dwell on a strong authority or on the force of violence in order to gain the trust of the people. (Su 2010, 123)

Such praise from a Confucian perspective echoes the Deweyan interpretation of democracy, by which the diffused practices of consensus building, embodied by “cultural” or “social” policies, are seen as the pathway to allow a broader political participation among the populace, more than the normative establishment of a specific set of rules and mechanisms.³ No pressure from above is needed to convince the citizens to trust and take part into the administration, and no single (or personal) authority is entitled to make decisions for the entire community, thus allowing the public spirit to triumph over the selfish tendencies (and here, in his Swiss eulogy Su returns to another binary opposition inherited by the Confucian classics: the one between “common interest”, *gong* 公, and “disruptive selfishness”, *si* 私). The Swiss confederacy is presented as inspired by the “acceptance of differences” and the “division of power”, and favouring the bottom-up participation of “self-governing political communities” to the federal government of the country (*ibid.*, 125). In conclusion, promoting an “external neutrality” and an “internal federal democracy”, Switzerland deserves to be defined as “closely resembling the Royal Way praised by the Sage Philosophers of the Chinese antiquity” (*ibid.*, 132).

Su Yigong’s approach might be considered as a curious, partially naive, somehow isolated exercise in comparative analysis, inspired more by the venerable Confucian tradition of “praise and blame” than by scientific objectivity. However, with his paper Su puts himself in continuity with a perhaps marginal—but nonetheless significant—tradition of Chinese idealized descriptions of the Swiss confederacy, which are the object of the present article and which will be examined in their “ideal” and “conceptual”—more than purely historical—entanglements and resonances.

Conceptualizing the West: Nations as Political Models

This analysis of some modern Chinese descriptions of the Swiss political system is based on two assumptions. First: the observation of foreign models (specifically

3 For an extensive analysis of how Dewey’s views on democracy resonate with modern and contemporary Confucian elaborations, and of how they were imported in China, see Ames and Hall (1999).

Western, with the exception of Meiji Japan) was a central element in the intellectual and political discussions on how to save China and build a strong state that developed from the late Qing to the mid-20th century. As Peter Zarrow explains “Educated Chinese at the end of the nineteenth century, no matter how great their pride in their culture’s general accomplishments, saw China as a loser, not a pacesetter, in the historical race”. Consequently, “they were willing to forgo many long-accepted ideas about political order to build a modern nation-state, taking as models various examples of success: Britain, Germany, France, the United States, Russia and Japan” (Zarrow 2012, 20). Rather than looking *within* China in search of virtuous examples from *their past*, as the traditional Confucian understanding of history prescribed, they looked *outside* and *forward*, positioning China and the West along a linear vision of time and using Western institutional inspirations in order to catch up with the most advanced countries. In this process, “intellectual resources from the West and from China’s past [were] cited, translated, appropriated or claimed in moments of perceived historical contingency so that something called *change* (might) be produced” (Liu 1995, 30). As the collapse of the traditional order, and the very real threat of a partitioning of China by foreign powers, grew in intensity, the knowledge of the “Occidental Other” became less a neutral process of knowledge transfer, than—as Theodor Hutters points out in his study on the appropriation of the West in late Imperial China—a somehow forced exchange, charged with a sense of urgency and anxiety. For the Chinese intellectuals of the time, then, “the recourse to the West was at the same time mandatory and highly distasteful” (Hutters 2005, 14). By this token, “the question of the position of Western knowledge became an important—if not the most important—leitmotif within late Qing thought, with overtones reaching throughout the twentieth century” (ibid., 45). Talking about the West was not an exclusive feature of the discourse promoted by the Westernized radicals, as Edward Fung calls them (Fung 2010, 27–58). Praising foreign models could mean looking at experiences as different as the enlightened authoritarianism of Peter the Great (as in the case of Kang Youwei), US Republicanism (as for Sun Yat-sen), at the German centralized state, or at the British constitutional monarchy. In some cases these foreign examples could also serve to reinforce conservative positions on the necessity to nurture and express a “Chinese essence”, as European countries had presumably done in the past. Countries—or more precisely, the political system represented by those countries in that specific historical moment—became a pivotal part of the transfer of concepts between China and the outside world. Indeed—and this is the second assumption of the present paper—as this process was not limited to an objective geographical or anthropological description, but was entangled to political discourses, those countries became “political concepts” in themselves.

Therefore, they can be studied, in their “translation”, “circulation” or “appropriation”, through the methodological lens of conceptual history/*Begriffsgeschichte*—defined as the study of concepts

seen as focal points of interpretations and understanding; as identifying regularities and differences in human discourse; as windows through which we can appreciate how comprehensions of the world are organized and brought to bear on action. (Steinmetz, Freedon and Fernández-Sebastián 2017, 1–2)

In this regard, “nation-concepts” can be observed as undergoing all the four processes defined by Reinhart Koselleck as pertaining to the *Sattelzeit*—the saddle-epoch in which a “jump to modernity” took place in 18th century Europe. They were “temporalized”—by virtue of a linear understanding of history; they were “politicized”—as part of a political discourse on how to reform China; they were subsequently “ideologizable”, in other words they could be used in the construction of an ideology; they were “democratized”—as knowledge of the foreign countries became an essential part of a much broader debate than the pre-1850s discussions on the external world, which were limited to the elite.

When we look at the circulation of these concepts, we are also exploring two dimensions of “comparative political thought”, following the guidelines by Michael Freedon and Andrew Vincent, namely “the self-understanding of the entity in question” (China, in this case), and “how the entity understands others” (Freedon and Vincent 2013, 12).

Within this framework, I will try to show that the “nation-concept” of Switzerland presented some interesting and unique features. More specifically, it was permeated by a utopian nuance from the beginning of its transfer into China, something which—as witnessed by Su Yigong’s article—has survived until today.

Why was Switzerland-as-a-concept temporalized by being positioned at the end of history—if we intend Utopia as a premonition of the final stage of mankind’s evolution, the *non plus ultra* of historical development? Why did it become a counter-concept to the traditional Chinese political order—if by “traditional” we intend the centralized, monarchical and authoritarian model that was blamed by the late Qing modernizers (as well as by the late Ming reformers)? And why was it presented to the public as an unreachable option for China?

I will argue that the answer to this confinement of the Swiss model to the realm of utopia is to be found not so much in the *democratic* nature of Switzerland (which also plays a role in the Chinese fascination with it, of course), but in its

de-centralized structure—both administratively and culturally—and in its *bottom-up* processes of political legitimation: in other words in its *radical federalism*.

The “Peach Blossom Spring” of the West

The idealization of the Swiss system—or its conceptualization as a utopian political order—was already explicitly discernible in the first description of the country circulating in modern China.

In 1849, at a moment in which the knowledge of the Western world was an almost virgin field of inquiry, and yet a matter of pressing urgency, Xu Jishe 徐继畲 (1795–1873) wrote the *Yinghuan zhilüe* 瀛环志略 (*A Short Account of the Maritime Circuit*), a text whose production and circulation overlaps with the more famous *Haiguo tuzhi* 海国图志 (*Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms*) by Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1857), which in its third edition, completed in 1852 and marking a pivotal moment in the Qing understanding of the external world,⁴ contains passages identical to Xu’s work.

In the fifth chapters of his atlas, Xu depicts the small Alpine country. There, in the author’s personal remarks concluding the survey, Switzerland is described as the “Western land of happiness” (*Xitu zhi lejiao* 西土之乐郊), a land in which the “thought of liberty” has thrived, a spot “untouched by military invasions” and “admired by all the Western countries”. The importance of local government is stressed as the historical peculiarity of the country: “At first Switzerland was divided into three parts, then in 13, and they all elect their local administration.” “I would say that Switzerland is the Peach Blossom Spring of the West”, Xu concludes (Xu 1849, *juan* 5).⁵

With this last observation, Xu presents a Western country as the realization of a popular Chinese fictional *topos*, introduced in the eponymous work by the poet Tao Yuanming 陶渊明 (365?–427) in the 5th century. In his short poem *Tao-hua yuan* 桃花源 (*The Peach Blossom Spring*), Tao had imagined a small and idyllic community undisturbed by the unification of the Qin Empire, in which a communal and pre-Imperial way of life had been preserved in the midst of a pristine natural environment. This narrative, reused and reshaped throughout the

4 To quote Peter Michell, in Wei’s work “errors occurred, particularly in the confused description of Western religions, but still it was commendably accurate, illustrating a comprehensive inquisitiveness and detailed attention to facets of barbarian culture outside of mere curiosities and exoticisms meant for the reader’s amusement” (Mitchell 1972, 192).

5 Wei Yuan will include Xu’s chapter on Switzerland in the third edition of his famous Atlas, without altering a single word (the reference to the Peach Blossom Spring included).

following centuries, has often (but not unanimously) been credited as the first example of utopian literature in China (see Zhang 2002). Through Xu's literary comparison, Switzerland is thus put in connection with Tao's anti-authoritarian dream, and indirectly contrasted to the *badao* imposed on China by the First Emperor and later allegedly preserved across the dynasties. The Swiss political system—sketched by Xu in its basic features, through which its strong local and anti-centralist orientation are highlighted—is *de facto* praised as an anti-authoritarian (anti-Legalist, to frame it in the traditional philosophical debate of Imperial China) model of governance. At the same time, however, by comparing it to the non-historical community described in Tao's fictional poem, it is pushed to the borders of utopia. In other words, rather than being presented as a credible political model to be used—at least for inspiration, if not for full adoption—it is de-historicized, and treated as a fascinating but ultimately useless antipodean political structure coming from the “far West”.

The perception of the Swiss model as exotic and useless (in political terms), becomes even clearer when looking at how, in the same text, Xu Jiyu introduces another federal country of 19th century Europe, Germany (Xu 1849, *juan* 4). In contrast to the utopian treatment reserved for Swiss federalism, the German example is conceptually adapted to the Chinese context by connecting it not to a fable-poem, but to a historical precedent: namely, the *fengjian* (封建) system. The latter, following Arif Dirlik's definition, indicated

something akin to a ritual enfeoffment, or the establishment of a fief, that prevailed during the early Zhou dynasty, when the Zhou kings formally made grants of land and labor to their subordinates, creating a landed nobility with whom they shared the administration of the Zhou territories. (Dirlik 1996, 229)

As will be discussed later in this article, the association of a modern federal system with the Zhou model of shared governance—used here by Xu as a way to familiarize his audience with a foreign political structure—would ultimately strike a fatal blow to the aspirations of Chinese federal movements in the early 20th century.

“Turning Swiss”: A Model for Independence

As the crisis of the Qing Empire accelerated towards its dramatic conclusion, references to Switzerland started appearing in texts charged with a clearer political urgency, when compared to the prevalently informative nature of Xu's and Wei Yuan's works.

In 1902, a few decades after the publication of Xu's accounts, Yang Yulin 杨毓麟 (1872–1911), a Hunanese patriot fighting for the independence of his province in the last years of the Manchu rule over China, would optimistically claim: “We will turn my Hunan into a Cuba, we will turn my Hunan into a Switzerland” (Yang in Platt 2007, 119). The pairing between Cuba and Switzerland is interesting: it might suggest an anti-colonial interpretation of two very different historical experiences, but the fact that this claim for independence was not directed towards foreign invaders, but rather against the Qing Court, underlines its autonomist component. Provincial independence was to those activists the only way towards a new China, free from Manchu domination but also free from an oppressive “centre” of internal domination.

A much more famous revolutionary from Hunan, Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893–1976), would also use Switzerland as a model for his project of provincial autonomy in 1920 (before turning into an admirer of Qin Shi Huangdi 秦始皇帝 and of his hyper-centralism, once the CCP was set to conquer power at the national level): “Some people regard Hunan as the Switzerland of the East. We can indeed look at Switzerland as a model for our ideal Hunan” (Mao in Platt 2007, 195).⁶

“Turning Swiss” might have been an unprecedented—and exotic—slogan for Hunan. Yet, a book with this title by Thomas Brady, published in 1985, shows how this had been a relatively popular political claim across 15th-century central Europe (a historical fact which, we would guess, was not common knowledge in 20th century Hunan).

At that time, in the decades preceding the Reformation, the Swiss confederacy was a powerful “political model for surrounding peoples” (especially in South Germany), a freedom-based model which appeared to “reproduce itself by example” (Brady 1985, 30). In that context, “turning Swiss” became a “revery” for the country’s neighbours as a new concept of “liberty” seemed to threaten the Imperial order (*ibid.* 34).

Liberty in the old sense, which began to fade during the seventeenth century, appeared in the heart of the feudal order and could, and did, become lordship’s bitterest foe. It could mean a monastery’s immunities, a city-state’s autonomy, the clergy’s freedom from lay jurisdiction, the provincial estates’ rights to consent to taxes, or simply the rights of self-administration of a city or of a rural folk. Though radically egalitarian only by contrast with dominant social patterns, nowhere did liberty in this

6 Mao, “Declaration on the Occasion of the Founding of the Association for Promoting Reform in Hunan”, again quoted in Platt (2007, 195).

sense flourish more radically than in the Swiss Confederacy, and there nowhere more fully than in the Forest Cantons. What seems radical about this self-administration of ordinary people is the association of liberty with productive labor, a European idea that departed dramatically from Graeco-Roman culture's belief in the incompatibility of human labor with true humanity. The disruptive power of the idea of liberty lay therefore not so much in its formal definition as in its extension to the commons, those free and mostly free persons who were normally ruled by their social betters and who "are now allowed to have minds and spirits". (ibid., 6)

"They deprive the nobles against their will of their serfs" and "make the subjects disobedient" (ibid., 31), a Habsburg supporter lamented, commenting on the Swiss threat against the imperial system. Through the eyes of those whose authority was menaced by it, the Swiss model appeared as the negation of a naturally hierarchical political order. It is easy to imagine that the Imperial Confucian bureaucrats at Court, facing the demands for a larger degree of local autonomy or—even worse—some forms of communal liberty and "self-administration" raised by Yang Yulin and his fellows, would have shared the contempt of the Habsburg supporters, rather than the 21st-century admiring look of Su Yigong at the fulfilment of a Confucian "royal way". The emergence of small and autonomous (and democratic) polities might have realized a utopian condition in literature, but when applied to politics it would have presented a dystopic threat to the Confucian-legalist principle of a single and undisputable source of authority and legitimacy for the entire *tianxia* (天下)—a barbaric subversion of the necessary hierarchy that assigns the *junzi* 君子 (gentleman) and the *xiaoren* 小人 (common man) to their respective duties and positions.⁷ Facing the crisis of the Qing, the idea of localism started to attract more interest, seen as all the more exciting in the radical political change that it would bring to a traditionally holistic conception of the polity. And again, Yang Yulin's coupling of Cuba and Switzerland in his pamphlet seems to suggest this conceptual focus on the issue of self-determination and rupture of an Imperial (or imperialistic) political order in the name of grassroots freedom.

As Luo Zhitian wrote in this context,

Shortly after the Boxer disaster, Chinese scholars began to feel that the Qing government could not be relied upon to save the country and started engaging in a type of intellectual gymnastics that resulted in the notion that national salvation could only be achieved without the central

7 On the endurance of monarchic values in China, see Pines 2012.

government, only through the fragmentary method of local self-rule (*difang zili* 地方自立). (Luo 2017, 324)

Back to Utopia: Kang Youwei in the “Garden of Europe”

As for the fortunes of the “Helvetic model” across Europe and America, in the centuries following the Reformation idealizing the political system of Switzerland became ever more common, especially among Republican thinkers or federalist theorists—from Rousseau (who defined the Swiss “among the happiest people in the world”) to John Adams (who praised the canton of Neuchatel as having “the only constitution in which the citizens can truly be said in that happy condition of freedom and discipline, sovereignty and subordination”) (see Maissen 2019). Xu Jiyu’s description of the country, noted above, clearly carries an echo of that laudatory tradition. Two years after the appearance of Yang Yulin’s pamphlet in Hunan, a prominent Chinese intellectual—who was fighting his political battle on the opposite camp, advocating the re-centralization and constitutionalization of the Manchu monarchy—was equally fascinated by Switzerland as such a “happy” place. In contrast to Yang, though, Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858–1927) had actually been to that small and diverse European country. His impressions became a short text among his collection of travel journals from Europe.

The following excerpts clearly show the picturesque (and again, almost unrealistically utopian) impression left in Kang’s eyes by the Swiss confederacy in 1904.

Switzerland is not a country; it is the garden of Europe. And it is not just a garden for Europe; in fact, it is an unsurpassed place of pleasure for the entire world.

Family houses along the lakes are incredibly old and their gardens are surrounded by small fences; up and down on the mountains, you can see so many churches, but they are old and covered with white dust, many of them shabby and run-down. There are villages with a hundred families, and some three-storied houses are extremely worn-out; villagers are poor, but they collect firewood and carry it on their backs to embellish their homes.

People living on the Swiss mountains are so poor, their homes so humble ... Even in the city of Luzern, the buildings along the main avenues are modest, houses are low, streets are narrow: being surrounded by mountain peaks, they have had no development, and their old traditions are still preserved.

Walking in the capital you won't find shops: people are too poor to go shopping, and there is nothing worth seeing except for the Parliament, the University, the Museum, that are all nice and new.⁸ (in Kang 2007, book 7) (author's translation)

Poor and happy, Switzerland appears as an almost idyllic context in which there is no need for authoritarianism or political coercion:

Their political system is extremely egalitarian, every individual has the right to vote.

All the political power emanates from the Parliament which convenes in the Swiss capital, they have no Imperial Palace and they have no president. As they have no president, instead of him they have a speaker.⁹ (ibid.) (author's translation)

As noted earlier, differently from Yang and other “provincial patriots”, Kang could not be counted among the supporters of federalism, of Republicanism (at least in his activity as a political activist for China) or provincial independence. On the contrary, his failed reform plan of 1898 for the transformation of the Qing into a constitutional monarchy might be considered as the last attempt at re-centralizing the ailing Manchu dynasty, a response to the increased provincial power from the Taiping War onwards, rather than a blueprint for de-centralization.¹⁰

Kang's fascination with Switzerland, then, reflects his utopian propensity, more than his concrete political plans. Such a propensity—built over his progressive interpretation of Confucianism and his linear view of history as moving from chaos and separation to order and unity—would be fully expressed in the *Datongshu* 大同书 (*Book of Great Concord*). In this text, allegedly completed in 1902, but deriving from a much longer reflection started in the 1880s—and fully revealed to the public only posthumously in 1935—Kang describes human history as a triumphal

8 瑞士非国也，欧洲之大公园也。非惟欧洲之大公园也，实全球之绝胜乐土也。沿湖人家楼屋甚古，园林皆有短垣，依山上下，亦多塔庙，然白灰尘旧，率多敝坏。有村舍百家，楼屋而三层敝坏尤甚，村人贫苦，但为渔樵，晒网负薪，无自修葺其屋。瑞士山居本甚贫，屋甚卑小，卢顺大市而街衢楼阁亦甚卑，屋层亦甚矮，道甚窄，殆以山间崎岖，无从展布，而也旧俗相沿。瑞士山居本甚贫，屋甚卑小，卢顺大市而街衢楼阁亦甚卑，屋层亦甚矮，道甚窄，殆以山间崎岖，无从展布，而也旧俗相沿。进京无商务，民贫物贱，亦一无可观，惟议院、大学、博物院，三者皆新稍可人耳。In the following decades, more Chinese intellectuals, journalists or officials would visit Switzerland and write their impressions. A collection (translated into German) is provided by Fröhlich and Gassmann 2000.

9 其政最平等，人人皆有选举权。瑞士京之议院，盖全瑞政权之所自出，以其别无王宫，亦无总统署。盖瑞士无总统，只有议长。

10 For an in-depth study of the 1898 reforms, see Karl and Zarrow (2002).

march from conflicts and suffering to an age of global stability. At the end of history, a one-world democratic and republican government, in which political offices are time-limited and elective, will rule over the entire planet, abolishing boundaries (social, economic, sexual, racial, linguistic, religious) and granting peace and welfare for every individual. At first sight, the political system imagined for the Age of Supreme Equality very much resembles a “globalization” of the Swiss direct democratic model. At the same time, however, Kang’s one-world utopia does not seem to adopt the Swiss *federalist* structure (and inspiration). If we define federalism as underpinned by the principle of a “shared rule” (Kincaid 2011)—and, from a cultural point of view, as a system based on and conducive to the acceptance of linguistic, religious, ethnic pluralism—then the utopian world cultivated by Kang out of the classical concept of *Datong* (大同) does not seem to be inspired by such a necessity for the preservation of pluralism. On the contrary, the Great Concord is the universal expansion of a process of centralization—meaning central planning and redistribution of resources, and centralized institutions—from the national to the global level.¹¹ Kang thus offers yet another variation on the Swiss conceptual theme. Admired for its peace and frugality, the country is seen as something of a utopia for its democratic and republican system, which is openly praised (including the practice of a “collective leadership”); but its federalism—so central in the rhetoric of Hunan’s independentists—is left out of the picture. The ultimate goal of history, according to Kang, is the highest possible degree of unity as a protection against conflict. If Switzerland recognizes linguistic and religious pluralism, in the world of *Datong* only one language will be spoken and religion will exhaust its function, as the hopes and aspirations of mankind will be fulfilled by the power of technology and pervasive socio-political planning. The need for a universal homogeneity, as marshalled by Kang, makes the Swiss garden an idyllic but politically fragile solution to the pressing questions of “modernity”.

Liang Qichao and Chen Jiongming: Switzerland and the “Immaturity” of China

A few years after Kang’s Swiss travelogue, his most famous pupil would cast a less picturesque and more substantially political look at the confederacy, considering Bern as a potential (although ultimately discarded) model for actual reform. In “Issues Concerning the Construction of a New China” (*Xin Zhongguo jianshe wenti* 新中国建设问题) written in 1911 during the tumultuous revolutionary

11 For an analysis of Kang’s apparently ambiguous reflections on democracy and republicanism, focusing on his two-sided (utopian *vs.* Statist) approach to political action, see Brusadelli (2017).

autumn, Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873–1929) describes the institutional asset of the small country at the heart of Europe as part of a survey of the possible models for post-Imperial China:

How about a political system with no head of state? This is possible without incurring in frauds and problems only in very small countries like Switzerland. The power of the Swiss central institutions can be extremely weak, and in cases of extremely important laws the National Assembly hands the power to vote to every citizen.

This is a country that has been always neutral, with no foreign aggression, small and scarcely populated, with a perfected habit of self-governing, which therefore did not aim at a strong government. As for our country, if we do not get a strong and powerful central government, how could we even survive as a country?¹² (Liang 1999, vol. 8, 2434) (author's translation)

The key element in Liang's reflection—and in his subsequent considered rejection of the Swiss model—is, again, the acknowledgement of the necessity of having a strong central authority in China. Even for a convinced reformer like Liang, the Confucian-Legalist paradigm of a central power, hierarchically superior to any possible local sub-power, cannot be sacrificed on the altar of representative democracy. If modernization means building a stronger and more efficient state, the geographical, social, cultural and external conditions of China—in combination with the existential threat posed by the foreign powers—make it imperative to look at centralizing processes rather than at a radically federal solution. And if China needs a new and “modern” community of citizens, as Liang firmly believed, this requires a centralized nation to be constituted and nurtured, without dispersing energies on the local level, at least until those “new citizens” are mature enough to make decisions at a grassroots level without jeopardizing national unity. Japan or Germany, countries that interpreted local government not in terms of federalism—as a “shared rule”—but as a top-down “devolution” of power, are taken by Liang as better examples than the ultimately ‘utopian’ Swiss institutional architecture.

Although put aside by Liang, Switzerland unsurprisingly became the focus of attention as a potential source of inspiration for the (unsuccessful) Chinese federalist

12 不置首长之共和政体何如？此惟极小国若瑞士者，乃能行之而无弊。瑞士一切中央机关，权力皆甚微弱，稍重大之法案，国会辄不敢擅决，以付诸国民投票，不独执行机关为然也。彼为永世中立国，绝无外患，内之则地狭民寡，而自治之习甚完，无取夫有强大之政府也。我国今日，非得一极强有力之中央政府，何以为国？

movements that thrived during the following decade, partially following on the steps of the “local patriots” of the pre-1911 period.

After the provincial secessions of 1911/1912, and before the success of Jiang Jieshi’s 蒋介石 (1887–1975) reunification in 1927, the adoption of a federalist institutional asset seemed to be a reasonable solution for post-Imperial China. One of the most complete and detailed plans for a federal China—and at the same time one of the last attempts at providing a political alternative to the centralism of the Guomindang (GMD)—was written during the completion of the Northern Expedition by the “intellectual warlord” Chen Jiongming 陈炯明 (1878–1933).

A key ally of Sun Yat-sen 孙中山 (1866–1925) in 1911, then governor of Guangdong, Chen opposed the GMD’s idea of using the southern province’s revenue to finance the Northern Expedition in 1923–1924. His defence of the local prerogatives of Guangzhou led him to a conflict with the father of the Republic that marked him as a traitor.¹³ Sun’s turn to the Soviet Union influenced his own political agenda: his federalist sympathy was buried under the Leninist organizational model of democratic centralism, thus fuelling the conflict with Chen.

After fleeing to Hong Kong, Chen would continue to advocate a federal solution to the division of China. In 1927, as the GMD was finally conquering the North, fulfilling Sun’s dream of a newly reunified Republic under the control of a strong central administration, the exiled Chen published his own roadmap for a different kind of national reunification.

In his *Modest Proposal for the Unification of China* (*Zhongguo tongyi chuyi* 中国统一刍议) (1927), Chen wanted to prove that a convinced federalist could also be a “national patriot”. He drafted a program that, at least in his opinion, would harmoniously blend a democratic approach to local legitimacy with the need for a strong state (and for a unified military, overall). It is not the work of a philosopher, but the reflection of a *xiucai* 秀才 “(talented official) of action”—the man that John Dewey described as “the most impressive of all the officials whom I have met in China” (Dewey in Chen 2000, 1).¹⁴ Opening with a foreword by the prominent nationalist intellectual Zhang Binglin 章炳麟 (1869–1936), the text provides an analysis of the chaos in Chinese that claims it is caused by six elements: the absence of a constitution, the absence of a proper parliament, an unelected president, an unchecked government, a decentralized army, and dysfunctional (and non-democratic) political parties.

13 One example of the Communist narrative of Chen as a “traitor” can be found in Huang (2003). A rehabilitation of Chen’s federalism, inviting a rediscovery of his “sincere democratic spirit”, is attempted by Duan and Ni (2008).

14 In his book, Leslie Chen presents an accurate analysis of his father’s political blueprint.

Chen's solution to the broken Chinese state is then articulated along the following lines: unifying the army; creating a political union, for permanent institutional stability (a significant move, by which he tries to conceptually disentangle “federalism” from the idea of division or fragmentation); putting power back into the people's hands, thus defeating the “two jackals from the same cave” (the Southern one-party policies of Jiang's GMD and the Northern military cliques, who were both preventing the emergence of a democratic China); and preserving the multi-ethnic nature of the traditional Empire in the new Chinese federation, as the first step to an Asian federation.

Chen's federal China should be based on three principles: the principle of self-government (*zizhizhuyi* 自治主义), thus fully legitimizing provincial institutions as “institutional actors”; the principle of self-sustainment (*zijizhuyi* 自给主义), as the foundation of a federal economy, through which a significant portion of local resources would be managed on a local level; and the principle of federation (*lianhezhuoyi* 联合主义), the political core of the platform, which would provide the country with a set of shared institutions embodying the common identity of the Chinese people.

When elaborating this last point, Chen interestingly presents the possible models through which “federative processes” might be implemented.

Here, following Liang's method, Chen surveys some of the possible models China could look at. After examining presidentialism and the British cabinet-system—both unsuccessfully applied by Republican China, Chen says—he discusses the “committee system” (*weiyuanzhi* 委员制), which he ascribes to Switzerland:

The committee system is in vogue now—it was even experimented with by members of the Party—and if the results were not noteworthy, this is not due to the system itself. Switzerland implements it with remarkable success: a small country with many capable individuals, in which the people have a rich political experience, members of the administration are satisfied with their duty and follow the directives of the legislative body, and there is an appeal system that amends the shortcomings of the legislative body; that is why the system is implemented with full benefits. Let's look at China's circumstances: would it be possible for us to rigorously adopt the Swiss system? It is not quite suitable, and it would need adjustments which are not to be discussed now.¹⁵ (Chen 1927, 11) (author's translation)

15 委员制颇属时髦，且为党人所试验，虽其结果无何特色，不尽由制度本身。然瑞士行之所以成效卓越者，国小而多材，人民富于政治经验，行政部安于职守，俯听立法部议决之指挥，而又有创制复决制度，以救立法部之失，所以推行尽利，试问中国情势，欲严格采仿瑞制其可得乎。其为不尽适宜，须加损益，已不待言也。

Switzerland, once more, is examined, and almost uncritically praised, but ultimately discarded as an extremely “exotic” political model, unfit for China. However, it is not federalism itself that is really addressed here by Chen, but the shared type of political leadership exercised by the federal government. Even if not directly related to the issue of local self-administration (which, in contrast, plays an important role in Chen’s plan), the Swiss institutional arrangement is again presented as characterized by the idea of a diffused political legitimacy—shared not just among different territories, but even among different individuals at the central level, or often distributed among the common citizens.

Although discarding the excessively “utopian” Swiss system, Chen’s proposal moves on to describe a federal and democratic plan for China, much closer to the Jeffersonian model than to the Soviet (or Prussian) centralized model, cherished both by the Nationalists and the Communists after the mid-1920s. And yet Alexis de Tocqueville—whose praise for the American model as embodying the perfect balance between a central government responsible for the state’s general safety, and a decentralized administration allowing the full participation of the people, is justly celebrated—would perhaps have ironically sided with the GMD, in his conviction that China “provides the most perfect model of a centralized government that exists in the universe” (Tocqueville in Thompson 1988, 192). In this cross-cultural and diachronic game, Chen Jiongming would have found some comfort in the observations handed down by another French intellectual, Evariste Huc (1813–1860), who praised instead the richness of China’s “decentralized administration” as a noteworthy feature of the Empire (Thompson 1988, 191).

Conclusion: Utopia and Failure

Evariste Huc and Chen Jiongming’s admiration for the local dimension of political power in China would ultimately prove to be delusional. Federalism in general—even in its less utopian forms, as in Chen’s manifesto—missed the window of opportunity that had been opened from the Taiping rebellion (with the pendulum of power moving from the ailing Qing Court to the provincial governor) up to the early years of the Republic. Already in the mid-1920s, a decentralized China ceased to be considered a viable option, politically and conceptually.

The closure of this path is confirmed by the fate of the term *fengjian*: for centuries used by the opponents of centralist authoritarianism as the marker of a more decentralized and balanced political system, and often used by proponents of modern Chinese federalism to anchor their model in some historical precedent—as it was discussed earlier in this paper—it started being used by Marxist intellectuals

to translate the negative concept of “feudalism” (see Dirlik 1996). Consequently, an originally neutral, or even positive historical concept (associated by Confucianists with the golden age of the Zhou king and contrasted to the tyrannical centralization of the Qin), became irreversibly (and negatively) associated with pre-modern values: within the inescapable Marxist teleology, it was precisely “*fengjian*” (feudalism) that had been obstructing the linear and evolutionary progress of Chinese history for centuries.

With this conceptual shift from “decentralization” (as a potentially positive solution to many of the political problems plaguing China) to “feudalization” (as an irredeemably negative historical experience)—a shift facilitated by the traumatic experience of the *actual* political and territorial division of China in the warlord era—federalism could not be seen as entailing modernity anymore. On the contrary, it became synonymous to the preservation of those traditional “local loyalties” that had repeatedly undermined national unity and left China vulnerable to external attacks. In the end, as Prasenjit Duara notes, “the interplay of power politics and authoritative language enabled the hegemonic, centralizing nationalist narrative to destroy and ideologically bury the federalist alternative early in the history of modern China” (Duara 1995, 177–78).

Back to Switzerland, then, for our conclusion. If countries can serve as concepts, and can be observed and interpreted as semantic coalescences in which—to follow, again, Reinhart Koselleck—historical experiences are accumulated and formulated and then projected on time, then the small Alpine country, temporalized and transformed into a “utopian” concept, appears as a counter-concept (*Gegenbegriffe*) to “traditional China” intended negatively as a hyper-centralized polity.¹⁶ As Poland was used in China across the 19th and 20th centuries as a warning on the danger of the “death of the country” (see Wagner 2017), so Switzerland emerged as an example of the utopian experience of an anti-monarchic and anti-centralist polity. The fate of this political concept—in its different declensions, as we have briefly sketched above—ultimately reflects the problem for Chinese intellectuals or activists in conceptualizing federalism, or more generally the lack of a precise political/cultural centre. The *Erfahrungsraum* (“space of experience”) of Switzerland was therefore confined to a utopian dimension: from a Chinese perspective, it represented a fascinating program, unfortunately impossible to some, or potentially dangerous to others. This last connection—between the lack of a clear and unquestioned source of political/cultural authority and the implosion of the country—became especially prevalent after the trauma of division and

16 See Koselleck 1979, 349–75. A recent example of conceptual studies focusing on geographical concepts is provided by Mishkova and Trencsényi (2017).

internal violence experienced during the warlord era, thus strengthening the ideological links among feudalism, localism and separatism. Breaking the totem of monarchism and the probably stronger myth of centralism represented a fracture that required some kind of “utopian projection” to be accepted. The “exoticization” of Switzerland and the political (and conceptual) failure of federalism in China thus seem to be connected: elaborating a shared view of sovereignty, substituting the Imperial model of *tianxia*, by which authority necessarily flows from one undisputed source at the top of the system, and substituting it with a system that acknowledges polycentrism and institutionalizes the practice of self-government, was a difficult—finally impossible—task. A conceptual difficulty, as noted, both originating from and sustained by the dire *historical* circumstances of political fragmentation in the “dynastic cycle”. “In a world of disaggregated states”, writes Anne-Marie Slaughter, “the sovereignty that has traditionally attached to unitary states should arguably also be disaggregated. Taking this step, however, requires a different conception of the very nature of sovereignty” (Slaughter 2004, 186). In those countries that successfully embraced it, federalism emerged in parallel to the acceptance of the idea of “fragmenting” the political order of the Empire, shifting the ideal of Unity from the Kingdom of Men to the separated religious dimension of the Kingdom of God. With no way out to a spiritual level separate from Nature (and from Politics), the Chinese concept of Unity/*tianxia* had to be formulated as pertaining to *this world*. As Yuri Pines points out, monarchic centralism served as one of the ideological pillars of the “everlasting empire”, whose legacy remains robust (Pines 2012). As the cult of centralism seems to be daily reaffirmed in Xi Jinping’s China, Su Yigong’s paper—with his praise for the Confucian (and anti-legalist) Swiss model—provides a contrast that, in its echoing of fascinations with federalism from an exotic Occident, appears as counter-historical and utopian as its predecessors.

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