Conceiving an Alternative: The Ideological Underpinnings and Political Blueprints of Chinese Federalism

Abstract:
This article contributes to the hitherto limited scholarship on the Chinese federalist movement in the 1910s and 1920s by conducting a thorough investigation of its ideological underpinnings and political blueprints. It compares the federalist thoughts, plans, and activism of three thinkers, namely Zhang Taiyan, Zhang Shizhao, and Chen Jiongming, who stood firmly against the centralist trajectory of state-building in China after 1911 and who advocated the formation of a Chinese federation. It argues that instead of emulating Western models, Chinese federalists critically engaged with a wide range of ideologies – Daoism, Buddhism, social Darwinism, parliamentarianism, guild socialism, anarchism etc. – in formulating their federalist agendas. Underlining the Chinese tradition of self-government, a tradition that was reinterpreted during the late-Qing and early Republican periods, this article gauges the ways in which and the extent to which Chinese federalism entailed an alternative to Western political modernity.

From Local Self-government to Federal Self-government
In the 1910s and 1920s, a federalist movement extended the prevailing local self-government (difang zizhi 地方自治) activism since the late Qing to contribute to China’s political reformation. The causes of this movement are manifold: Above all, provincial-based uprisings – first against the Qing government and then the Beiyang government under Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 – enhanced provincialist sentiments. Furthermore, the provincial legislative assemblies (sheng yihui 省議會), formed based on the twenty-one provincial assemblies (sheng ziyiju 省咨議局) established by the Qing, timely institutionalized the increasing attempts at provincial autonomy. Finally, Yuan Shikai’s death in 1916 resulted in further political and military fragmentation, hence the crisis of warlordism. Many military strongmen (especially the southern ones) not only initiated their regimes on provincial basis but also supported provincial autonomy.1 Despite the clamor about provincial self-government growing louder and louder in the 1910s, “federalism” did not crystallize into a political discourse and nationwide movement until the autumn of 1920, when Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 published his article “On federal self-government and devolution of central power.”2

In the autumn of 2020, encouraged by recent attainments of provincial self-government, namely Hunan’s recovery of the provincial government from the hands of Beiyang powers and Sichuan’s and Guangdong’s successful defense of their own territories from military intrusions of neighboring provinces, Zhang Taiyan advocated a system named “federal self-government” (liansheng zizhi 聯省自治 meaning, literally, united provinces of self-government) to endorse provincial autonomy on the one hand and realize a Chinese federation on the other. Zhang

Taiyán’s call for federal self-government served as a catalyst for the Chinese federalist movement. Published right after an academic symposium in Changsha that brought together prominent thinkers such as John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培, Zhang Dongsun 張東荪, and Zhang himself to discuss China’s political crisis as well as the potential of provincial self-government, Zhang’s article provided an ideological framework for Chinese intellectuals to coordinate their federalist thoughts. In the meantime, his circular telegrams addressed to military strongmen of southern provinces – Tan Yankai 譚延闓 and Zhao Hengti 趙恒惕 of Hunan and Chen Jiongming 陳炯明 of Guangdong in particular – urged their collective dedication to realizing federal self-government at least in South China. The term “federal self-government” made a hit. It quickly resonated with supporters and was immediately adopted by newspapers to represent the increasingly vociferous but hitherto fragmentary federalist activism in China.

Compared to the concept of “local self-government,” that of “federal self-government” or federalism has been much less explored in the historiography of the late-Qing and early Republic. As Arthur Waldron points out, federalism is mentioned but once in the relevant volume of The Cambridge History of China, and its assessment has been along the lines laid down by Jean Chesneaux in the 1960s: It was “a movement of the traditional and conservative forces of Chinese society, of the gentry of the southern and central provinces and of the local warlords...” Waldron criticized the essentialist view and derogatory tone embedded in this assessment, which, he believes, has entirely missed two crucial facts: “First, that federalist ideas had been advocated in good faith since the late nineteenth century as the best means to renew China, and secondly that many Chinese advocated federalism above all because they saw it as a cure for warlordism.” Although Waldron’s short article does not demonstrate what the Chinese federalist movement really was, he draws attention to the roots of warlordism and explains why federalists believed that federal self-government was the only solution. Hu Shi, a prominent intellectual and supporter of the federalist movement, argued in 1922 that the ultimate source of warlordism was the attempt to unify China by force of arms from above. Believing that China was too large to sustain a centralized system, Hu insisted that only by developing strong local self-government and cultivating civil society that China would be able to end the cycle of violence and to achieve and maintain real unification.

The federalist movement in China was not simply a contingent and instrumental solution to warlordism, however. Rather, it had its roots in the ideas and praxis of local self-government

---

5 Duara, Rescuing History from the Nation, 187.
in the late-Qing period. Scholars agree that the apparent inadequacy of Qing administration enabled active involvement of local elites in providing public goods and fostered the idea of local self-government.9 In the seventeenth century, distinguished thinkers Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 and Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 had already concerned themselves with administration reforms along the lines of “letting the locals manage local affairs.” Two centuries later, Feng Guifen 阮桂芬, a prominent late-Qing reformer, drew upon these ideas and advocated that a quasi-official should be established at the subcounty level to be chosen by the people of locality.10 Delving into the rich legacy of Gu and Huang’s thoughts, scholars have tried to discern the ideological attributes of late-Qing local self-government. Roger Thompson pays attention to the intellectual lineage of jingshi (經世 Statecraft School) to which Gu and Huang were initiators while Feng an important heir. Seeing jingshi as a practical political thought and action, Thompson suggests that it aided autonomous local initiatives without impeding the tasks of state-building during late-Qing reforms.11 Instead of jingshi, Prasenjit Duara focuses on the tradition of fengjian 封建 or feudalism as the ideological underpinning of local self-government. Gu Yanwu and Huang Zongxi’s ideas, for Duara, not only concerned a new structure of local administration but also a new relationship between local authority and the central state. Gu and Huang turned to the fengjian tradition, as opposed to the more centralized junxian 郡縣 system, to advocate local autonomy, free from being ruled by officials sent by the central state from outside of the province, and they encouraged the institutionalization of gentry participation at local levels to contain the power of the imperial state.12 In line with Duara’s focus, Theresa Man Ling Lee draws attention to the neo-Confucian elements of the fengjian tradition. Lee points out that local self-government for Huang Zongxi was not simply a way of good governance but a channel of self-education and self-cultivation. Late-Qing reformers such as Kang Youwei 康有為 and Liang Qichao 梁啟超, adhering to the neo-Confucian tenet, associated local self-government tightly with the cultivation of modern citizens.13

The dialectical – instead of antithetical – relationships between local society and state and between the private and the public were thus intrinsic to local self-government in the late Qing. When facing critiques that self-government would cause corruption and factionalism, Feng Guifen followed Gu Yanwu in arguing that if any degree of civic virtue existed among ordinary Chinese, it was to be found in a local setting due to people’s natural tendency toward the si (私, private, familial or communal interests).14 Unlike Feng who perceived the si as the civic foundation of local self-government, Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao saw the potential of self-government in cultivating the gong 公, namely, public-mindedness. It was through “self-rule”

12 Duara, Rescuing History from the Nation, 153.
or “self-mastery” that people were to become public-minded citizens, while it was through local self-government that citizens could be prepared, administratively and morally, for a modern state.\textsuperscript{15} When late-Qing reformers evoked the fengjian tradition, they hoped to preserve the autonomy of local society as much as to bring this society into a state modernization project.\textsuperscript{16} Zhao Erxun 趙爾巽’s promotion of the xiangshe 鄉社 system in Shanxi and Liang Qichao’s advocacy of fengjian during the reform movement in Hunan both demonstrated how local self-government – inspired by traditional principles and ways of governance – constituted reform efforts at modernizing and strengthening the Chinese state.\textsuperscript{17} As Mary Rankin asserts, unlike the situation in Europe at the same time, elite-led local societies in China were not in conflict with the state, although toward the end of the nineteenth century tension between local and central authorities had become increasingly visible.\textsuperscript{18} Duara, however, is less concerned about matching Chinese experience against the Western model of “public sphere” or “civil society,” urging, instead, further inquiries into fengjian as an evident Chinese tradition of local autonomy and as a late-Qing narrative of self-government.\textsuperscript{19}

Despite acknowledging late-Qing local self-government as a preface to the federalist movement that heightened in the early Republican era, scholars are pessimistic about the continuation of fengjian in China’s political reformation and state-building.\textsuperscript{20} Duara asserts that the first decades of the twentieth century saw the inroad of the state and the demise of the fengjian tradition. Many late-Qing reformers, Liang Qichao included, discarded fengjian to adopt a strong statist discourse and to fulfill China’s state-building along Western lines. As it unfolded against a historical backdrop where the tenet of nation-state became dominant and connotations of fengjian turned pejorative, the federalist movement could not, and eventually failed to, benefit from fengjian as a Chinese tradition of local autonomy or as an alternative narrative of state-building. What were the ideological underpinnings of Chinese federalism then? Duara made a general indication that Chinese federalists were forced to rely on “a series of modern discourses and theories such as social Darwinism, constitutional theories of federalism, and an ingenious coupling of provincial autonomy with popular sovereignty.”\textsuperscript{21} Similarly, Keith Schoppa defines the provincialist and federalist activism in Zhejiang between 1917 and 1927 as a “constitutional autonomy movement” empowered by borrowed and adapted classical Western liberal thought.\textsuperscript{22} In the most recent publication concerning locality and Chinese political culture, federalist dynamics in the early 1920s are still regarded as nothing but a version of localism legitimated by “Western political theories of federalism.”\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{15} Lee, “Local Self-Government in Late Qing,” 39-44.
\textsuperscript{16} Duara, Rescuing History from the Nation, 153-154.
\textsuperscript{17} Thompson, “Statecraft and Self-Government,” 193-203; Duara, Rescuing History from the Nation, 154-155.
\textsuperscript{18} Rankin, “The Origins of a Chinese Public Sphere,” 24.
\textsuperscript{19} Duara, Rescuing History from the Nation, 150-152.
\textsuperscript{20} Waldron, “Warlordism Versus Federalism,” 117-118; Duara, Rescuing History from the Nation, 177.
\textsuperscript{21} Duara, Rescuing History from the Nation, 170-178.
\textsuperscript{22} Schoppa, “Province and Nation,” 667.
While the existing scholarship takes it for granted that Chinese federalism echoed Western political values and institutions, it falls short of examining the ways in which and the extent to which Chinese federalism entailed Western political modernity. Did the Chinese tradition of self-government lose all its relevance to Chinese federalism? How did Chinese federalists engage with social Darwinism, constitutional principles, the creed of parliamentary democracy, and the idea of popular sovereignty in formulating Chinese federalism? And most importantly, how far did Chinese federalists emulate Western models politically, culturally, and philosophically in projecting a Chinese federation?

To answer these questions, this article compares the federalist ideas and blueprints of three thinkers, namely Zhang Taiyan, the initiator of federal self-government, Zhang Shizhao 章士釗, a Hunanese political theorist who was the first to systematically theorize federalism and who played an active role in Hunan’s self-government movement, and Chen Jiongming, a Cantonese regional strongman who promoted federal self-government in Guangdong and whose commitment to federalism eventually resulted in a coup d’état against Sun Yat-sen. The three case studies are selected for the following reasons: Above all, although many Chinese jumped on the bandwagon of federal self-government during this period, the above three initiated the most elaborate ideas and plans not only for fulfilling local self-government but also for materializing a Chinese federation. And they established indisputable intellectual and political leadership during the Chinese federalist movement. Furthermore, while the three thinkers resonated with one another on their paths to federal self-government, their federalist trajectories were shaped by their critical contemplation on a wide range of ideologies – Daoism, Buddhism, social Darwinism, parliamentarianism, guild socialism, anarchism etc. – and thus manifested the various and complex political, cultural and philosophical elements that Chinese federalism entailed.

---

24 Sun Yat-sen and some Kuomintang revolutionaries, whose power base lay in the province during their uprisings against the Qing and then Yuan Shikai, were among the first Chinese thinkers who desired federalism. From 1897 onward, Sun on different occasions expressed his wish to establish a Chinese republic along federalist lines. His inaugural speech as the provisional president of the Republic of China in 1912 proposed to attain a federal unification of provinces based on provincial self-government. However, Sun’s attitude toward provincial self-government and federalism changed as soon as Yuan died. After 1916, he criticized provincial self-government as a form of centralism at the provincial level, while advocating self-government only at the county level. As the federalist movement reached its peak in the early 1920s, Sun’s open repudiation of federalism as well as his insistence on unifying China in a centralist manner resulted in a confrontation between him and federalists such as Zhang Taiyan and Chen Jiongming. For more information, see Hu Chunhui 胡春惠, Minchu de difang zhuyi yu liansheng zizhi 民初的地方主義與聯省自治 (Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju, 1983), 45-57; Guo, Negotiating A Chinese Federation, 117-129.

25 Zhejiang, Hunan, and Guangdong were the three southern provinces that witnessed the most vigorous federalist activism and the most successful promulgation of provincial constitutions. As this article will show, the three thinkers, being natives of the three provinces respectively, profoudly engaged in local self-government activities.

26 There exists abundant research on Zhang Taiyan’s philological and philosophical attainment and on Zhang Shizhao’s political writing. Chen Jiongming, despite not being a celebrated name in the intellectual history of modern China, has attracted fresh scholarly interest about his contribution to regional reforms. However, the three have been studied more often as philologist-philosopher-revolutionary, political theorist, and regional strongman, respectively, than as federalists. There is still limited understanding of their federalist ideas and plans and,
In my previous work, I have briefly touched on the endeavor of Chinese federalists to critique the discourse of nation-state and the exploitative power of the state, which they saw as the ills of Western modernity. Built on my earlier research, this article intends to expand the inquiry into Chinese federalists’ engagement with Western political modernity – that is, not only the political thoughts and institutions for modern state-building (e.g. nationalism and parliamentary democracy) but also the cultural and philosophical norms derived from the experiences of Enlightenment, industrialization and capitalism (e.g. Hegelian progressivism and social Darwinism) – on the one hand and with the Chinese tradition of local self-government on the other. Investigating not only their ideological trajectories but also political propositions, this article seeks to gauge how and how far Chinese federalists projected an alternative to – rather than simply a variation of – Western political modernity.

Social Darwinism, Daoism, and Federal Self-government

Before becoming a prominent federalist, Zhang Taiyan had been, famously, a nativist, nationalist, and Han-centrist, promoting a Han Chinese sovereign nation-state. He adhered to Bluntschli’s notion of nation and maintained that a nation, entailing fundamental and organic ties such as blood, race, history, language, and custom, was more than a political association. Importantly, of the intricate ideological interaction among them within the context the Chinese federalist movement. Important scholarship on Zhang Taiyan’s thoughts includes Viren Murthy, The Political Philosophy of Zhang Taiyan: The Resistance of Consciousness (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Wang Fansen 王汎森, Zhang Taiyan de sixiang jiqi dui ruxue chuantong de dongji 章太炎的思想及其對儒學傳統的衝擊 (Taipei: Shibao wenhua chubanshe, 1985); Lin Shaoyang 林少陽, Dingge yiwen – Qingji geming yu Zhang Taiyan fugu de xinwenhua yundong 鼎革以文 – 清季革命與章太炎復古的新文化運動 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chebanshe, 2018). Significant scholarship concerning Zhang Shizhao’s political theories includes Leigh K. Jenco, Making the Political Founding and Action in the Political Theory of Zhang Shizhao (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Zou Xiaozhan 鄒小站, Zhang Shizhao shehui zhengzhi xiangsi yanjiu 1903-1927 章士釗社會政治思想研究 1903-1927 (Changsha: Hunan jiaoyu chubanshe, 2001), and Morikawa Hiroki, Zhenglunjia de jinchi: Zhang Shizhao, Zhang Dongsun zhengzhi sixiang yanjiu 政論家的矜持: 章士釗, 張東荪政治思想研究, translated by Yuan Guangquan 袁廣泉 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2017). And recent scholarship on Chen Jiongming includes Leslie H. Dingyan Chen, Chen Jiongming and the Federalist Movement: Regional Leadership and Nation Building in Early Republican China (Ann Arbor, United States: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Izabella Goikhman, “Chen Jiongming, Becoming a Warlord in Republican China.” in State, Society and Governance in Republican China, edited by Mechthild Leutner and Izabella Goikhman (Münster: LIT Verlag Münster, 2014), 77-101.

27 Guo, Negotiating A Chinese Federation, 227-228.
28 Zhang applied different criteria in defining a nation and faltered between monogenism and polygenism regarding the origin of human race, but his effort to demarcate a distinctive Han Chinese nation was evident in the early 1900’s. Murthy, The Political Philosophy of Zhang Taiyan, 72-78; Charlotte Furth, “Culture and Politics in Modern Chinese Conservatism,” in The Limits of Change: Essays on Conservative Alternatives in Republican China, edited by Charlotte Furth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 131; Zhang Taiyan,
His commitment to the survival and rejuvenation of the Chinese nation propelled his political leadership during the anti-Manchu movement and the 1911 Revolution. For Zhang Taiyan, the to-be-established republic, or the political nation, would serve as a necessary base where “national essence 國粹,” or the Han Chinese cultural nation, could thrive and dominate. As a nationalist (as opposed to imperial loyalists such as Kang Youwei) and, most importantly, as a revolutionary, Zhang Taiyan is often categorized as “radical” in political terms. Charlotte Furth and Prasenjit Duara both regard Zhang – and more generally the “national essence” school – as culturally conservative but politically radical. Criticizing such dualism between the cultural and the political, Aymeric Xu premises a “fusion of the cultural and political nation” on a notion that the cultural should be evaluated according to the political, and that conservatism/radicalism should be gauged with regard to modern Western values. This is to say, since Zhang was politically radical (meaning, adhering to modern Western political values), he should not be seen as culturally conservative – at least not in an essentialist sense – as he reinterpreted traditional cultural elements in a radical way to legitimate socio-political changes inspired by the West. The existing interpretation of Zhang Taiyan’s federalist ideas largely corroborates the same teleology. As Duara indicates, politically federal self-government incorporated the democratic ideology of self-government, while culturally it forwent the Chinese tradition of self-government to be able to embrace modern Western discourses and theories.

Contrary to this interpretation, Zhang Taiyan did not think that his federal self-government followed any modern Western example. Instead, he criticized the federal systems of the United States and Germany for allowing the central government to maintain substantial power. Stressing “self-government” as the basis of federal self-government, Zhang made it clear that residents of a province must promulgate their own provincial constitution, directly elect civil and military officials at all levels within the province and form their own provincial army. When discussing “self-government,” he never adopted the term “democracy” (minzhu 民主) despite its popularity and omnipresence in May Fourth writings. Instead, he returned to Gu Yanwu and Feng Guifen’s idea, implying that his confidence in self-government rested not upon Western-style institutions, the parliamentary system in particular, but upon the moral and emotional bonds among provincials. The purpose of such self-government was, as Zhang explained in a candid and lucid manner, to “void” (xuzhi 虚置) the central government. According to Zhang, all recent chaos in China were caused by the centralization of power with

“Zhonghuaminguo jie” 中華民國解, in Zhang Taiyan quanji 4 章太炎全集四 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1982), 252-258.
30 Furth, “Culture and Politics in Modern Chinese Conservatism,” 24-28; Duara, Rescuing History from the Nation, 207.
31 Xu, “Mapping Conservatism of the Republican Era,” 136-137, 143; Xu, From Culturalist Nationalism to Conservatism, 87-89.
32 Duara, Rescuing History from the Nation, 177, 187.
the central government. While competitions for presidency resulted in civil wars and warlordism, corruption at the power center diffused through local levels. The only solution was to deny the central government all its power, including the power to administer military and diplomatic affairs. Urging the devolution of power to the provinces, Zhang was confident that provincials, compared to officials of the central government, would care more about the interests of their own province and therefore would be more capable of defending their province from both foreign intruders and Chinese traitors. Such federal self-government, as Zhang asserted, “has never been seen in other countries and is especially viable for China.”

Unlike Kang Youwei or Liang Qichao, Zhang Taiyan had never been a big fan of Western parliamentary democracy. To him a western-style parliament would neither help produce a successful constitutional monarchy as reformers expected nor a democratic republic as revolutionaries desired. In his article “For or against a parliamentary system” published in 1908, he explicated why the to-be-established republic should adopt presidency but not parliamentary politics. The power of president, argued Zhang, would be defined, and limited through dividing executive, legislative, and judicial responsibilities, but the parliamentarians would constitute a new privileged class and become despots who cared only about the interests of their own political parties, thus impeding, instead of facilitating, the communication between president and local people. He went so far as to argue that, for a country as big and populous as China, becoming a parliamentary democracy would be more detrimental than remaining an autocracy as the latter had only one despot. In 1922, promoting “a big reform” (da gaige 大改革) toward federal self-government, Zhang Taiyan went even further. He not only reiterated his aversion to parliamentary politics but also launched a polemic against presidency. Presidency, parliament, and national constitution were now identified by him as the three menaces causing centralization of power and producing endless wars in China. The Chinese federation proposed by him would have no big parliament with political parties but a simple and strictly limited federal assembly (liansheng canyiyuan 聯省參議院) comprising around 100 assemblymen directly elected from among the provincials (no more than five from each province), no president but an executive committee consisting of five to seven members, and no national constitution but a federal constitution whose promulgation was strictly subject to that of provincial constitutions. Clearly, with such federal self-government in mind, Zhang Taiyan attempted to depart from Western-style parliamentary government, which he deemed centralist and statist in nature.

Does this mean that Zhang Taiyan based his federal self-government on an anarchist ideal? Indeed, when he was in Japan between 1906 and 1911, he became close to Tokyo anarchists such as Liu Shipei 劉師培 and Zhang Ji 張繼. But as scholars have cogently argued, Zhang differentiated himself from the anarchists in terms of their views on evolution. While the

---

38 “Zhang Taiyan gaige fazhi zhi xinzhuang,” 13; Zhang Taiyan, “Gaige yijian shu” 改革意見書, in Zhang Taiyan zhenglun xuanji, 801.
anarchists adopted the Hegelian view of progress and thus saw anarchy as the highest stage of human evolution where people would finally become equal. Zhang negated social evolution as a linear progress. For Zhang, evolution was simply change, something inevitable but entailing no principle, purpose, or progress. Therefore, although “equality” was a concept no less central to his political thought than to the anarchists’, he refused to search for equality at “the end of history.” Rather, he believed that to understand and realize equality one needs to return to the beginning.

In 1910, Zhang Taiyan wrote A Commentary on the Qiwulun to discuss the essence of equality in Taoist terms. Focusing on Zhuang Zi 莊子’s idea of “achieving equality by allowing difference” (buqi er qi 不齊而齊), Zhang noted that the key to equality lay in nothing but “treating things in accordance with what they are.” Believing that it was the constructed categories, value-imbued concepts, and politically motivated discourses that prevented people from doing so, Zhang argued: “It is only when one is detached from speech, detached from words and detached from the mind taking objects as its causal conditions, that one understands absolute equality.” Such Taoist reflection on equality paralleled his profound contemplation of self-consciousness along the lines of Yogācāra Buddhism (the Consciousness-only school of Mahayana Buddhism). Perceiving human evolution as a process of self-realization – that is, a process of constructing categories, naming names, and creating “us,” “other,” “group,” “state,” and “universe,” and a process that would see the augmentation of human will leading to both good and bad results – Zhang Taiyan asserted that evolution was no progress, while the end of evolution might well be the opposite of equality. Only by returning to Ālaya consciousness, that is, the rudimentary consciousness based on which self-consciousness evolved and the “pre-originary” stage where there was not yet distinction between us and other, could true equality be attained. As Viren Murthy puts it, instead of self-realization, Zhang Taiyan “stresses self-negation and the end of history as the negation of history.” In this regard, for Zhang, reaching the end of history meant nothing but returning to the beginning and to the pre-originality so that one could rid himself of not only the constructed boundaries (namely universe, state, group,

and eventually us/other) but also the constructed axiom (gongli 公理) of evolution thereby getting closer to equality.  

Scholars agree that the years between 1906 and 1911 marked a turning point in Zhang Taiyan’s political thoughts. Having delved into Taoist and Buddhist tenets during this period, Zhang questioned not only the discourses of evolution, civilization, and nation-state, but also their ontological and epistemological basis. The question is, what would be the alternative if the entire philosophy and institution of Western modernity were to be negated? In other words, what would be the externalized entity of Ālaya consciousness or the Taoist notion of equality? Murthy maintains that Zhang Taiyan “rarely discusses the details of a political or cultural system of equalization.” It might be true that before 1911 Zhang had not yet projected an alternative, but the same cannot be said about his ideological developments in the 1910s and 1920s. I argue that it was based on the Taoist notion of equality that Zhang Taiyan conceived and promoted his federal self-government. What he desired was not a modern Western system but a pre-originary organism of self-government as a solution to the problems of Western modernity, particularly the consecration of nation-state and the concentration of power at central level. Although the federal system that he stipulated in 1920 was not exactly a pre-originary anarchy as it still required the promulgation of provincial constitutions and the formation of a federal assembly, he constantly stressed “true self-government” as the prerequisite to a Chinese federation. He said in his circular telegram sent to the various provincial self-government associations that:

We’d rather have no government at the national level than have no self-government at the local level. [In terms of self-government] we must embrace our own native society while leaving other groups in peace. And we must let sages lead while allow ordinary people to fulfil their talents.  

This passage seems to allude to the ideal of village self-rule, but Zhang Taiyan did not want to associate his federal self-government with any tangible element of Chinese tradition, including that of fengjian. His ideological trajectory regarding fengjian was a complicated one: In 1899, following Huang Zongxi’s thought on fengjian, he advocated the restoration of fanzhen 藩鎮 – frontier polities established outside of the metropolitan region – to both cultivate local self-government and defend China from foreign invaders. He soon abandoned his idea on fengjian to embrace nationalism and centralism as he turned from a reformist to revolutionary at the turn of the century. Although he was increasingly attracted to federalism after 1911, he did not return to his earlier thoughts on fengjian. This might have been due to, as Duara suggests, the derogatory connotations of fengjian in the New Culture and May Fourth period.  

48 Murthy, The Political Philosophy of Zhang Taiyan, 217.  
49 “Zhang Taiyan yu geshengqu zizhi lianhehui dian” 章太炎與各省自治聯合會電, Shenbao, January 6, 1921, 10; “Zhang Taiyan duyiu Zhejiang shengxian zhi yijian” 章太炎對於浙江省憲之意見, Shenbao, June 14, 1921, 10.  
50 “Zhang Taiyan yu geshengqu zizhi lianhehui dian,” 10.  
52 Duara, Rescuing History from the Nation, 177.
Zhang Taiyan no longer needed *fengjian* since he now based his federalist blueprint on a different worldview. In 1908, he criticized the reformers’ employment of the *fengjian* tradition to justify China’s adoption of Western parliamentary democracy.\(^{53}\) What concerned him was not just *fengjian*’s anarchism but the use of China’s past to smooth the way for submitting to Western political modernity.\(^{54}\) Now, advocating federal self-government, Zhang aimed not to invoke a Chinese past to facilitate China’s progress onto a higher historical stage, but to escape Western modernity and return to the Taoist status of beginning.

For Zhang Taiyan, the legitimacy of his federal self-government primarily lay in the Taoist notion of equality, that is, achieving equality by allowing difference. Not long after the 1911 Revolution, he had already argued that “to achieve unification, we must understand difference...understanding the different customs and habits held by people while allowing them to evolve spontaneously is more important than establishing one overarching law.”\(^{55}\) In 1923, when the federalist movement was at its peak, he wrote a preface to the Chinese translation of James Bryce’s book *Modern Democracies*. Although four out of the six modern democracies that Bryce surveyed in this work were federations (namely Switzerland, the U.S., Canada, and Australia), Zhang was not convinced that parliamentarianism embodied in these democracies was compatible with his federalist idea. Not only did he reiterate the problems of parliamentary government, but he also questioned Swiss-style direct democracy. In his eyes, people’s right to initiate, referendum, and recall could hardly correct the defects of parliamentarism, but would rather “impose equalization on people (*qimin* 齊民) through executive and legislative procedures.” And such “equalization” would only harm a big, populous country where “morals are unequal and local customs are different.”\(^{56}\) This claim was consistent with his Taoist interpretation of equality: “To equalize the unequal is the vulgar obsession of the commoner; to achieve equality by allowing difference is the ideal discussion of the philosopher.”\(^{57}\) If equality, in the philosophical realm, could only be achieved by negating self-realization and seeing things in accordance with what they are, then as a political practice, it was to be attained by letting natives govern themselves without equalizing others and by fully representing local and provincial differences at a federal assembly. Thus, by promulgating federal self-government, Zhang Taiyan was hoping to foster equality philosophically as well as politically.

Federal self-government for Zhang Taiyan was not simply an extension of his philosophical idea, but also concrete political activities and actions. Between 1920 and 1926, he sent numerous telegrams to military leaders of southern provinces, urging them to defend provincial

---

\(^{53}\) Beginning with Wei Yuan 魏源, late-Qing reformers believed that the Duke of Zhou established the dynasty’s legitimacy by consulting eminent scholars across the empire and that the Zhou, as China’s last feudal dynasty, favored debate and thus witnessed the “sprouts of parliamentarianism.” Kuhn, “Ideas behind China’s Modern State,” 308; Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, 154.

\(^{54}\) Zhang, “Daiyi ran fou lun,” 300.

\(^{55}\) Zhang Taiyan, “Xianzonghe houtongyi lun” 先綜合後統一論, in *Zhang Taiyan zhenglun xuanji*, 551-552.


\(^{57}\) Zhang, “Qiwulun shi dingben,” 407.
self-government and reject collaboration with any centralist force.\(^5\) He criticized the two existing parliaments, namely the Old Parliament (*Jiugoohui* 舊國會) resumed in Beijing in 1922 under the Beiyang powers and the Extraordinary Parliament (*Feichang guohui* 非常國會) summoned in Guangzhou in 1921 by Kuomintang revolutionaries.\(^6\) He opposed Li Yuanhong 黎元洪’s assumption of presidency as a result of the restoration of the Old parliament as much as Sun Yat-sen’s election by the Extraordinary Parliament to be the Extraordinary President.\(^7\) While standing firmly against “parliament” and “presidency,” Zhang Taiyan dedicated most of his time to the promulgation of provincial constitutions and a federal constitution. On the one hand, networking among legislative scholars sojourning in Shanghai (e.g. Wang Zhengting 王正廷, Tang Dechang 唐德昌, and Li Jiannong 李劍農), he supervised the promulgation of provincial constitutions in Zhejiang, Hunan, and Guangdong provinces.\(^8\) On the other hand, serving as a special advisor for the National Affairs Conference (*Guoshi huiyi* 國是會議) in 1922, he laid down the principles for the promulgation of a federal constitution.\(^9\)

Zhang Taiyan was certainly not alone in promoting federal self-government. As a Zhejiang native, he worked closely with Zhu Fucheng 褚輔成, a Zhejiangese elite, in leading the Association for the Promotion of Federal Self-government (*Liansheng zizhi cujinhui* 聯省自治促進會), which brought together supporters from different provinces and remained active until at least 1924.\(^10\) The most heartfelt supporters of Zhang, however, did not hail from his home province Zhejiang, but the two southern provinces Hunan and Guangdong. As the next sections will show, although Zhang Taiyan shunned associating federal self-government with *fengjian*, his followers largely embraced federalism as a system compatible with the Chinese cultural and political tradition of village self-rule.

**The Village, Tiaohe, Guild Socialism, and Federal Group Self-government**

In 1916, Yuan Shikai died. Zhang Taiyan was freed after three years of house arrest ordered by Yuan. Yuan’s dictatorship and, certainly, the house arrest, made Zhang reflect on the nationalist and centralist views that he had held during the revolutionary period. In 1908, he rejected “any endeavor to separate the nation into federal states,” and proclaimed that “our current task is to consolidate the nation, unify languages, and harmonize customs…”\(^11\) Though, meanwhile, he argued that a centralized, unified nation-state was only necessary for weak

---

64 Zhang, “Daiyi ran fou lun,” 305.
countries like China to defend themselves and should be abandoned as soon as possible.65 How soon, then? In 1916, Zhang Taiyan felt that it was the right time to abandon “state” and “nationalism,” albeit China was still a weak country. One of the first things that he did after his release was to meet with Zhang Shizhao, his twelve-year younger sworn brother who had rigorously theorized and propagated federalism.66

Between 1914 and 1915, Zhang Shizhao made his magazine The Tiger (Jiayin 甲寅) a frontier forum for discussing federalism. In his long essay entitled “An academic theory of federalism,” Zhang investigated the compositions of not only the actual federations (such as the U.S. and Brazil) but also the potential ones (such as France and the British Empire) to make federalism a conceivable idea among his Chinese audience.67 His arguments were as follows: First, while a federation can be constituted by a group of independent states, it can also be transformed from a unitary state as in the cases of Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia. Second, in terms of state-building, there exists no fixed, linear progression from a confederation to a federation and then to a unitary state. Entailing tiaohe 調和, that is, dynamic “accommodation,” between confederation and unitary state, a federal system can be adopted by any country whose conditions are suitable for it. And finally, the key to realizing a federation is not revolution but “public opinion” (yulun 輿論).68 Clearly, such theorization of federalism was to pave a way for China, then a “unitary state” under Yuan Shikai, to adopt a federal system in a peaceful manner.69

Having studied in Britain for five years between 1908 and 1912, Zhang Shizhao was an admirer of the British political tradition. He opposed Jacobin-style revolutions as much as monarchical despotism, and advocated tiaohe among all prevailing political forces, interests, and emotions.70 The British parliament was, for him, the epitome of the spirit of tiaohe as it allowed the balance of power between the monarch, nobility, and people at the central state. And a federation, seen by him as a polity that could balance the elements of a loosely-knit confederation and those of a centralized state, would serve as an extension of the parliament to,

---

66 Zhang Taiyan nianpu changbian, 187; 525-540.
67 Zhang referred to the Girondins who revolted from the provinces against the dictatorship of the Montagnards in Paris as French federalists and the promoters of a British imperial federation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as British federalists.
69 It is worth adding that federalists during this period paid acute attention to the difference between the sovereign state (guojia 國家) and the state (bang 邦) as a self-government entity within a federation. Zhang Shizhao and Dai Jitao 戴季陶 both pointed out that the latter, despite enjoying a high degree of autonomy, was not to be confused with the former. These arguments facilitated the propagation of the term liansheng (united provinces) instead of lianbang 聯邦 (united states) in China as a precaution against the equation of federalism with separatism. Zhang, “Xueli shang zhi lianbang lún,” 18; Dai Jitao, “Zhonghua minguo yu lianbang zuzhi” 中華民國與聯邦組織 and “Da wen” 答問 in Dai Jitao ji 戴季陶集, edited by Zhang Kaimyuan 章開沅 (Wuhan: Huazhong shifan daxue chubanshe, 1990), 754-755, 794.
as Leigh Jenco puts it, accommodate the thriving energy generated by local talents and the homogenizing projects and institutions at the center. The tenet of tiaohe and the idea of “self-use of talent” therefore integrated with one another to become Zhang Shizhao’s federalist pursuit: “We must find an opportunity to stimulate the talents of people across the country, accommodate their different interests and emotions, and let this [dynamic accommodation] evolve into a constitution and into our political tradition.” Having attributed China’s missed opportunity to become a federation in 1911 to the centralist ideas that permeated and dominated public opinion, Zhang urged the public to fully discuss, embrace, and cultivate federalism.

As to how to crystalize federalism into a political system in China, Zhang Shizhao’s idea shows some ambiguity. On the one hand, he regarded parliament as the only legitimate and suitable institution to facilitate peaceful political transformation. When discussing the potential British federation, he cited James Bryce to suggest that the British empire’s transformation into a federation would be, in essence, a legislative reformation achieved through the formation of a decentralized federal parliament at the top (to replace the almighty Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland) and of colonial/regional parliaments at the bottom. But on the other hand, as Jenco discerns, he emphasized the cultivation of local talents (the neo-Confucian notion of self-rule) in lieu of their institutionalization through political means (the Western principle of rule of law) and thereby, to a great extent, placed local dynamics in opposition to institutions. Zhang Dongsun, an enthusiastic contributor to The Tiger and a proponent of federalism, was much less dubious in this matter. Emphasizing “self-government” and “separation of powers” as the two pillars of federalism, he believed that only parliamentary democracy would enable self-government at the local level and the separation of powers at the center. Arguing for the consonance between parliamentary government and a federal system, he suggested that China follow the example of Canada to demarcate provincial legislative and administrative regulations while emulate Australia to establish a bicameral parliamentary system.

Clearly, different from Zhang Taiyan’s philosophical and political stance, the federalism promoted by The Tiger largely ratified the institutions of parliamentary democracy while endorsed the liberalist principles of Western political modernity. This difference did not stop Zhang Taiyan from enhancing his bond with Zhang Shizhao in 1916, however. He urged his sworn brother to resume The Tiger, which had ceased publication one year earlier. More importantly, he reminded him of The Tiger’s federalist mission:

When Xingyan (Zhang Shizhao’s courtesy name) launched The Tiger, he made splendid efforts to promote federalism. But at that time, the dictatorship [of Yuan Shikai] was at its peak; everyone suffered from it. How could a federal system be established without first

---

71 Zhang, “Tiaohe liguo lun shang,” 7-8; Jenco, Making the Political Founding and Action in the Political Theory of Zhang Shizhao, 134.
73 Zhang, “Xueli shang zhi lianbang lun”, 18-19.
74 Zhang, “Xueli shang zhi lianbang lun”, 4-6.
75 Jenco, Making the Political Founding and Action in the Political Theory of Zhang Shizhao, 184-185.
toppling Yuan? Now time is different, and circumstances have changed. Federalism should be pursued without hesitation as we are faced with less difficulties today. I hope that Xingyan has not forgotten what he said [in The Tiger].

Not only had Zhang Shizhao not forgotten his pursuit of federalism, but he also began to doubt the compatibility of parliamentary democracy and Chinese tradition, and thus joined Zhang Taiyan to seek China’s own path to federalism. Between 1916 and 1919, Zhang Shizhao was disappointed by the performances of both the parliament in Beijing and the one in Guangzhou.

He decided to spend two years in Europe to “observe the post-war situations, meet distinguished scholars, acquire newly published scholarship, and examine the new literary, philosophical, political, and economic trends in the West.” This trip aggravated his existing concerns about parliamentary politics. Having witnessed the economic and political crisis facing post-war Europe and having discussed it with Fabian socialists such as George Bernard Shaw, G. D. H. Cole, and Arthur Penty, Zhang was convinced that Western parliamentary democracy was not suitable for China.

He sent a letter to Zhang Taiyan while he was still in Europe, in which he marveled at the foresight of his sworn brother: “Before the establishment of a parliamentary system in China, you had already launched a polemic against it, a polemic that others could not launch, dared not to launch, or wanted to but had no ideological strength to launch…”

If the ideological underpinning of Zhang Taiyan’s federalism lay in his total negation of Western modernity that valorized evolutionism, “classificationism,” and centralism, then that of Zhang Shizhao’s federalism lay in the idea of tiaohe, whose focus and purpose, though, changed significantly. When Zhang Shizhao first discussed tiaohe in The Tiger in 1914, he meant primarily an attitude of political accommodation and reconciliation embodied in parliamentary politics. But toward the late 1910s, he paid increasing attention to the cultural and philosophical notions of tiaohe. In 1918, at the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of Peking University, he made a speech entitled “Evolution and tiaohe,” where he argued:

“Old” and “new” are of one source – naming them “old” and “new” causes their separation. According to our conventional understanding, the so-called “old” is the disappearing phenomenon while the so-called “new” is the emerging phenomenon. When the “old” has not yet completely gone and the “new” has not yet fully arrived, there must be a shared space where “old” and “new” can accommodate one another…Without this shared space, the world

---

77 Zhang Taiyan nianpu changbian, 540.
78 Zou, Zhang Shizhao shehui zhengzhi sixiang yanjiu 1903-1927, 171-177.
79 “Zhang Xingyan hui Yue hou zhi tanhua” 章行嚴回粵後之談話, Shenbao, November 2, 1919, 7. Zhang’s departure was delayed. He planned to leave in 1919, but eventually left in February 1921 and returned to China in September 1922. Zou, Zhang Shizhao shehui zhengzhi sixiang yanjiu 1903-1927, 203, 208.
82 Although Jenco argues that by tiaohe Zhang Shizhao meant a kind of constant accommodation of differences that engaged everyone and everyday life, Zhang’s articles published in The Tiger nonetheless concentrated on issues of political reformation. See Jenco, Making the Political Founding and Action in the Political Theory of Zhang Shizhao, 193-223.
would not exist, and human beings would not evolve...What is this shared space? It is the space of tiaohe.83

With these notions, Zhang’s federalism was no longer intended to echo Western political modernity but to create a “shared space” where China’s cultural and political traditions could “tiaohe” the emerging exigencies of state-building. And such tiaohe, for him, was the dynamic of evolution. It is thus no surprise that, when he returned from the war-torn Europe to his home province Hunan, a province known for its agricultural prosperity and civilization, he was convinced that the space of tiaohe was not to be found in the Western parliament, but in the Chinese village.

From 1921 onward, Zhang Shizhao published a series of articles to advocate a new plan for political reformation, that is, “state-building based on agriculture” (yinong liguo 以農立國). For Zhang, China as an agricultural civilization was fundamentally different from the West where industrial civilization thrived. Economically, China had been self-sufficient, extolling the virtues of self-restraint and frugality, whilst industrial nations were expansive and exploitative, endorsing the concentration of capital and ostentatious urban constructions. Culturally, China had valorized familial bonds and communal support over individual competition, and ritual over interest.84 The Western parliamentary system, now in Zhang’s eyes representing capitalist interests and featuring interparty competitions, was more of a curse than blessing for China. Unlike Western politicians whose positions and authorities were sustained by the capital that they possessed, Chinese parliamentarians, being no capitalists themselves, had to rely on cheating, embezzling, and bribing to get elected and maintain their extravagant political activities. What China needed, asserted Zhang, was not parliamentary politics but self-government from village to province.85

Celebrating guild socialism promoted by the Fabians whom he met in Europe, Zhang Shizhao now called for self-representation among all professional groups – with peasants being the largest group – and envisioned a system called “federal group self-government” (lianye zizhi 聯業自治).86 Like guild socialists, he made it clear that his federal group self-government had nothing to do with the Soviet approaches seen in the USSR, which for him were centralist and statist in nature, subordinating production to politics and professional groups to the party-state.87 His federal group self-government, on the other hand, was consistent with Zhang Taiyan’s federal (province) self-government. “I dare to say,” stated Zhang Shizhao in 1925, “the key to state-building today lies in devolution; the more devolutionary a polity is, the more

83 “Zhang jiaoshou Shizhao zhi yanshuoci” 章教授士釗之演說詞, in Zhongguo jindai sixiangjia wenku, 476.
86 Zhang Shizhao, “Yezhi yu nong” 業治與農, in Zhongguo jindai sixiangjia wenku, 514.
advanced the state-building is. Federalists call for devolution [of power] to the provinces, I call
for devolution [of power] to professional groups."88

It is worth noting that Zhang Shizhao’s renewed plan demonstrated distinctive features
compared to guild socialism. Above all, whereas the so-called “self-government in industry”
avowed by guild socialists tacitly required an industrialized society as its prerequisite,
Zhang’s proposition deeply concerned Chinese rural society and rural tradition. For Zhang,
industrialization in the West produced capitalists and industrial workers. The former, thanks to
their capital, had been well represented in parliamentary politics while the latter now sought
their own political representation through industrial self-government. Believing that China had
neither big capitalists nor a substantial number of industrial workers, Zhang repeatedly stressed
that China’s political reformation must begin with rural organization.89 Furthermore, unlike
Cole who desired a dual system of two “supreme bodies” – namely a territorial parliament
representing the “consumers” and a vocational guild congress representing the “producers” –
to fulfill political democracy on the one hand and industrial democracy on the other, Zhang
Shizhao went much further in repudiating parliamentary politics. He reproached politicians and
parliamentarians for producing nothing for the world and suggested that only “producers” had
the right to political representation and sovereignty.90 This is to say, Zhang expected his federal
group self-government to replace, rather than parallel, parliamentary government.

Now that Western-style parliamentary politics was out of the picture, Zhang Shizhao faced the
same question as his sworn brother Zhang Taiyan: What kind of institutions should be
established in place of presidency, parliament, and national constitution – the three “menaces”
– to fulfill a Chinese federation? As previously discussed, the elder Zhang proposed an
executive committee, a limited federal assembly, and bottom-up promulgation of provincial
constitutions. The younger Zhang, despite having admired parliamentary democracy more than
his sworn brother did, now demanded a more radical break with it. He contended that if a
president tended to become a dictator, there was no reason to believe that an executive
committee would produce five or seven sages.91 Elections could hardly make things better,
since neither voters nor candidates in China had the appropriate tradition, education, or
competence to make elections work.92 Calling for the replacement of parliaments and political
parties with group self-government and that of election with examination, Zhang insisted that
local talents be cultivated and selected through examinations to manage group affairs.93 At the
provincial level, he advocated absolute provincial self-government regarding all military,
legislative, and political affairs albeit current conflicts and chaos: “[We must] let provincials,
civil bureaucrats, and military strongmen fight among themselves until these fights result in a
solid foundation for provincial self-government.”94 At the national level, like Zhang Taiyan,

90 Eisfeld, “The Emergence and Meaning of Socialist Pluralism,” 272-273; Zhang Shizhao,
“Yezhi lun” 耶治论, in Zhongguo jindai sixiangjia wenku, 508-510.
91 Zhang Shizhao, “Wushou bian da Xu Fosu” 無首辯答徐佛蘇, Zhongguo jindai sixiangjia
wenku, 506.
92 Zhang Shizhao, “Xin sichao yu tiaohe” 新思潮與調和, in Zhongguo jindai sixiangjia wenku,
486-487; Zhang Shizhao, “Zailun feidang” 再論非黨, in Zhongguo jindai sixiangjia wenku,
530.
93 Zhang, “Zailun feidang,” 530-531.
he believed that the central government must be completely “void.” But instead of an executive committee, he suggested selecting a “parasitic president” (jisheng yuanshou 寄生元首) whose presidency would be symbolic and whose political power would be minimal. The principal of Peking University, in his view, could be an ideal candidate to assume this role, supposedly in their leisure time.  

Having identified “parasitic president,” “group self-government,” and “examination” as the three pillars of his federal group self-government, Zhang Shizhao stressed the village as the basis of Chinese state-building: “All political affairs and social virtues rely on rural life and rural civilization.”

Zhang Shizhao was not the only intellectual who made a sharp turn in the immediate post-war period regarding China’s adoption of Western political principles and institutions. Zhang Dongsun, the old comrade of Zhang Shizhao during the Tiger period, also became a proponent of federal group self-government in the 1920s. Although he frowned upon the conservative tones of tiaohe and maintained that industrialization was the key to China’s survival, he nonetheless expected group self-government to stimulate China’s socio-political transformation in a non-statist, pluralist manner. And Liang Qichao, once a vociferous advocate of Western political modernity – from constitutionalism to social Darwinism and to strong nation-state – made a significant ideological turn after having returned from his trip to Europe. His new approach largely echoed that of Zhang Shizhao in terms of criticizing centralism as an intrinsic value of Western political and economic systems while emphasizing Chinese tradition – family farming and village life in particular – as the foundation for China’s reformation in the future. Liang returned to the idea of local self-government that he had advocated during the late-Qing period but deserted the statist undertone of his earlier thought. “The dream of having a centralized state is doomed, because we have forgotten that centralism is not consistent with the national tradition of Chinese people,” he now claimed. It is thus no surprise that, La Rekonstrue (Gaizao 改造), a magazine co-launched by Zhang Dongsun and Liang Qichao, proclaimed in 1920 that political representation in China was not to be attained through parliamentary politics but through a combination of group self-government and local self-government.

Both Zhang Shizhao and Liang Qichao contributed to Hunan’s provincial self-government and the promulgation of the Hunan Provincial Constitution (Hunansheng xianfa 湖南省憲法). In 1920, Liang Qichao lent his assistance to the prominent Hunanese elite Xiong Xiling 熊希齡.

---

95 Zhang Shizhao, “Yuanshou jisheng lun” 元首寄生論, in Zhongguo jindai sixiangjia wenku, 523.
96 Zhang, “Zailun feidang,” 531.
98 “Liang Rengong zai Zhongguo gongxue yanshuo” 梁任公在中國公學演說, Shenbao, March 14, 1920, 10; “Liang Rengong zai Zhongguo gongxue yanshuo 2” 梁任公在中國公學演說 2, Shenbao, March 15, 1920, 10.
100 Liang Qichao, “Gaizao fakanci” 改造發刊詞, La Rekonstrue 改造 Vol.3 No.1 (1920): 5-7.
in drafting the “Basic Law of Hunan Provincial Self-government” (*Hunansheng zizhi genbenfa* 湖南省自治根本法). This law laid the foundation for the promulgation of the Hunan Provincial Constitution in December 1921.  

Although Zhang Shizhao did not directly participate in the promulgation of the constitution (he was in Europe at that time), his intellectual disciple Li Jiannong, also a Hunanese, acted as the chief draftsman of the constitution. Containing thirteen chapters and 141 clauses, the Hunan Provincial Constitution reflected some of the pivotal ideas of Chinese federalists. In line with Zhang Taiyan’s principle of self-government, the constitution pronounced in its general outline that the right to provincial self-government belongs only to the people of the province. It further stipulated in chapter seven, a chapter addressing the executive matters, that military affairs of the province are part of the executive responsibilities of the Provincial Council (*Shengwuyuan* 眜務院), while the provincial army responds to the central government only when China declares war on a foreign country. Chapter six, concerning the important issue of legislation, articulated in its second clause that all professional groups, including peasant associations, have the right to propose bills, while the provincial legislative assembly has the obligation to second their bills.

In October 1922, having just returned from Europe, Zhang Shizhao met with the provincial military strongman Zhao Hengti in Changsha. By then, Zhao had gained his political reputation as an earnest proponent of federal self-government and a ruthless defender of Hunan’s provincial autonomy. And he was recently elected by popular vote the Governor of Hunan. Zhang must have been impressed with Zhao’s political commitment to federalism for he drafted Zhao’s inaugural speech and agreed to assist Zhao with the implementation of Hunan’s provincial self-government. Zhao immediately invited Zhang to work for the newly established Provincial Council, but Zhang refused. According to *Shenbao*, Zhang Shizhao did not return to his home province to become a politician or assemblyman. Instead, he was determined to, as an ordinary provincial, go to the peasants to stimulate group self-government as the first step toward federalism.

**The Village, Anarchism, and “United Provinces of China”**

---

102 Long Jiangong 龍兼公, “Hunan zizhi jilue” 湖南自治記略, *Dagongbao*, September 1, 1921, 10-11. Li Jiannong largely echoed Zhang Shizhao’s federalist thought of the *Tiger* period, but he was more pragmatic than Zhang regarding whether the existing parliaments could be used to promulgate a federal constitution. For more information on Li Jiannong’s ideas, see Chen Youliang 陳友良, *Minchu liuying xueren: cong Jiayin dao Taipingyang de zhenglun yanjiu* 民初留英學人: 從甲寅到太平洋的爭論研究 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2013), 205-231.
103 “Hunansheng xianfa” 湖南省憲法, 1-28, D929.6-342/26, Republican-period Collection, National Library of China.
Such spirit of “going to the peasants” and such passion for village life as a cultural, economic, and political antithesis of Western modernity demonstrated in Zhang Shizhao’s ideas in the 1920s could hardly claim any originality at the global level. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Russian intelligentsia, by promoting nihilism, Narodnism, anarchism, socialism and so on, had already thoroughly engaged themselves with the village. For the distinguished intellectuals of the time – from Tolstoy to Chernyshevsky and to Bakunin – the Russian mir or obshchina (rural commune) served not only as the fortress of Slavophil values embodied within “the people” and the base camp of social revolutions, but also as the very physical and psychological milieu where intellectual elites could remold themselves through living an ascetic, sacrificing life and through being with “the people.”

This Russian ethos profoundly influenced Chinese intellectuals and stimulated Chinese anarchist activism at the turn of the century.

Liu Shifu 刘师复, a native of Guangdong province, subscribed to nihilist and Narodnik thoughts while he was studying in Japan. He participated in anti-Manchu assassinations and the 1911 Revolution and, around 1912, established two anarchist organizations, namely the Conscience Society (Xinshe 心社) and the Huiming Society 晦明学社. Like the Narodniki who advocated a spiritual life of simplicity and labor, Liu Shifu and his followers adhered to strict moral codes themselves while calling for the total liberation of the society. Liu made “no drinking, no smoking, no hiring servants, no taking the rickshaw etc.” the commandments of the Conscience Society, while in the preface of People’s Voice (Minsheng 民聲), the organ of the Huiming Society, included vegetarianism as one of the society’s basic principles. Also like the Narodniki, Liu focused on the village as the basis of a world revolution that would eventually “destroy all suppressive power and achieve true freedom and happiness of the people.” Although Liu Shifu tried but failed to establish a rural commune of “cooperative living, learning, and laboring” in Guangdong, his political ideal was largely inherited by the New Village activists and rural reconstructionists from the 1920’s onward.

Chen Jiongming, a Cantonese military strongman and an assemblyman of the Guangdong Provincial Assembly during the period of the 1911 Revolution, maintained a close relationship with Liu Shifu. In 1910, Chen joined Liu’s Chinese Assassination Corps (Zhina anshatuan 支那暗殺團) and was henceforth deeply influenced by his anarchist idea. After Liu died in


112 Chen, Chen Jiongming and the Federalist Movement, 27.
1915, Chen played an important role in reviving Liu’s thought and resuming his anarchist network. Between 1918 and 20, when Chen stationed his troops in southern Fujian, he garnered support from Liu’s anarchist disciples for carrying out local reforms. Together they launched an anarcho-socialist magazine called Fujian Star（Minxiong閩星）. As soon as Chen secured his military dominance in Guangdong and assumed the position as Governor of Guangdong, he offered political shelter to these anarchists (most of whom were Cantonese) and endorsed the restoration of People’s Voice in Guangzhou, five years after the magazine had ceased publication due to Liu Shifu’s death. Chen Jiongming did not hide his adherence to anarchism. In the preface that he wrote for Fujian Star, he refuted the idea that weak nations would still need the state for self-protection – the very idea that Zhang Taiyan had held before his federalist turn. Believing that nationalism would mar a weak nation with exclusivism and egoism just the same as it would a strong nation, Chen claimed that nationalism was “not so useful” and called for a new “ism” that would benefit the entire human society.

It is no surprise that at the end of 1920 when Zhang Taiyan’s federal self-government made a national hit, Chen Jiongming became a staunch follower. Zhang’s call for depriving the central government of all its power resonated with Chen Jiongming’s anarchist thought. By early 1921, Chen already conceived a new “ism,” which featured a convergence of the Narodnik idea of “village commune” and Zhang Taiyan’s tenet of federal self-government:

The people of China are accustomed to self-government in their village communities and if there is to be democracy in China it will have to be evolved from these communities and their tradition of self-rule…We are beginning with villages and organizing them into sub-districts under committee rule…We propose to have the county magistrates and other local offices, as well as delegates to the Provincial Assembly, chosen by popular election…We believe that if we begin the application of our ideas in Guangdong…we can federate and bring in the others, one by one, until we have made China over into a liansheng zhengfu 聯省政府 – a government of united provinces.

Although Chen Jiongming, like Zhang Taiyan and Zhang Shizhao, paid attention to the Chinese tradition of village self-rule, the cultural and philosophical underpinning of his federalist idea was profoundly different from that of Zhang Taiyan’s and Zhang Shizhao’s.

Unlike Zhang Shizhao’s nostalgic imagination of a traditional Chinese village featuring tranquility, self-sufficiency, ethical order, and family rituals, Chen Jiongming’s village would be unmistakably a new village. Village communities would be tied together by Kropotkinian spirit of “mutual aid” not Confucian family rituals. Villagers would rely on local-level direct elections – “democracy” as Chen called it – instead of moral order and examination to fulfil self-government. The aim of Chen’s village self-rule was not to initiate an alternative state-building as opposed to the path taken by Western industrial states, but to facilitate the development of local industries (shiye 實業) on the one hand and to realize a “United Provinces

---

114 “Minsheng xiaoshi” 民聲小史, People’s Voice No.30 (1921): 1-4.
116 Rodney Gilbert, “A Pilgrimage to Guangdong – An Interview with General Chen Jiongming,” South China Morning Post, February 23, 1921, 7.
of China” that was not so dissimilar to the United States of America on the other.\textsuperscript{117} Like most Chinese anarchists, Chen Jiongming criticized capitalism but welcomed modern science and technology, celebrated Eastern civilization but advocated new culture.\textsuperscript{118} For him, a boundless new world could only be attained through a total transformation of human mind, while a new “ism” could only be achieved through creating a new culture.\textsuperscript{119} Despite mentioning village self-rule as a Chinese tradition, Chen Jiongming was not keen to idealize or rejuvenate the past as Zhang Shizhao did.

Meanwhile, unlike Zhang Taiyan, Chen Jiongming was an evolutionist. When Zhang Taiyan launched his polemic against the axiom of evolution (and indeed against any axiom that claimed universality in human history), Chen embraced social Darwinism so earnestly that he changed his courtesy name to “Jingcun,” meaning “struggle for existence.”\textsuperscript{120} He kept this name for the rest of his life even though as a follower of Kropotkin he believed in “mutual aid,” not class struggle, as the main dynamic of social evolution. All his ideological and political efforts were made for one final purpose, that is, to propel the evolution of the world and to realize “equal happiness” (\textit{jundeng xingfu} 均等幸福) of the entire human being.\textsuperscript{121} Village self-rule, as a way of life and a form of governance that epitomized “mutual aid,” was the means to achieve this end. Chen thus fitted well into the category of anarchists whom Zhang Taiyan criticized for their adoption of the Hegelian view of linear progress and for their placing “equality” and “happiness” at the end of history as a utilitarian goal. Zhang would be concerned about the kind of evolution that Chen desired, as for him “mutual aid” was not intrinsic to human nature, therefore equalizing people through such means might lead to the opposite of equality and happiness.\textsuperscript{122}

As a new culturalist and evolutionist, Chen Jiongming modelled his “United Provinces of China” on the federal system of the United States. In May 1922, he published his federalist blueprint in a document called “Federal self-government movement.” Adhering to American parliamentary democracy, this blueprint advocated the establishment of a bicameral system with an upper assembly representing the provinces and a lower assembly representing the citizens of the nation.\textsuperscript{123} While emphasizing the separation of central and provincial powers,

\textsuperscript{117} Gilbert, “A Pilgrimage to Guangdong,” 7, “Guangdongsheng zanxing xianzizhi tiaoli” 廣東省暫行縣自治條例, in Chen Jingcun nianpu, 1013-1014; “Xiansheng zhuzhong shiye” 先生註重實業, in Chen Jingcun nianpu, 193-194.

\textsuperscript{118} While Chen, in his poem entitled “Eastern civilization,” encouraged young people to return to the countryside and embrace the spiritual civilization of the East, during his rule of Guangdong he made relentless efforts to fulfil new education, industrialization, and urbanization. See Chen Jiongming, “Dongfang wenming” 東方文明, in Chen Jiongming ji 陳炯明集, edited by Duan Yunzhang 段雲章 and Ni Juming 倪俊明 (Guangzhou: Zhongshan daxue chubanshe, 1998), 419; Chen, Chen Jiongming and the Federalist Movement, 126-142.

\textsuperscript{119} Chen, “Minxing fakanci,” 1011; Chen Jiongming, “Minxing rikan xuyan” 閩星日刊宣言, in Chen Jiongming ji, 441-445.


\textsuperscript{121} Chen, “Minxing fakanci,” 1008.

\textsuperscript{122} Zhang, “Si huo lun,” 446-451.

\textsuperscript{123} Chen articulated in this document that the Chinese lower assembly would represent the citizens of the \textit{nation} instead of the citizens of the \textit{provinces}, whilst the U.S. founding fathers were vague about whether the House of Representatives represented the people of the \textit{nation}.
Chen did not over-prioritize provincial self-government. Contrary to Zhang Taiyan’s plan, his blueprint allowed the central government exclusive power to administer both military and diplomatic affairs and stipulated that provincial constitutions must not contradict the federal constitution.\(^\text{124}\) Chen’s blueprint might have comprised Zhang Taiyan’s principle of self-government, but even Zhang himself had to make certain comprise. At the same time when “Federal self-government movement” was published, the National Affairs Conference proposed two different versions of draft federal constitution. The second version, the less centralist one, was drafted under Zhang Taiyan’s auspices. This draft, like Chen’s blueprint, also placed diplomatic and military matters under the jurisdiction of the federal institution. But one can still discern a profound consistency between it and Zhang Taiyan’s original thought on federal self-government. According to the draft, China would establish a limited unicameral parliament (similar to the “federal assembly” proposed by Zhang) comprising around three hundred members, with each province electing thirteen members (five elected from the provincial legislative assembly, two each from the provincial peasant association, educational association, commercial association, and workers’ association). In this sense, the parliament would solely represent the provinces instead of any political party or the nation. Furthermore, China would have no president but an executive committee with nine members, who were to be first block voted by the parliament and then elected by provincial legislative assemblies.\(^\text{125}\) This draft federal constitution, coupled with the fully promulgated Hunan Provincial Constitution, would not only safeguard the political representation and authority of the provinces to the maximum extent, but also make sure that the diverse professional groups are well represented in legislative and executive activities at both provincial and national levels.

Between 1920 and 1922, Chen Jiongming played a crucial role in transforming the idea of federal self-government into reality in Guangdong. In December 1920, two regulations, namely the “Guangdong Provisional Regulation on County Self-government” (\textit{Guangdongsheng zanxing xianzizhi tiaoli 廣東省暫行縣自治條例}) and the “Guangdong Provisional Regulation on County-level Election” (\textit{Guangdongsheng zanxing xianzhang xuanju tiaoli 廣東省暫行縣長選舉條例}) were enacted under Chen’s watch.\(^\text{126}\) Four months later, more than two million registered voters in Guangdong (the total population of the province was approximately thirty million) participated in an election for county-level magistrates and more than sixty counties (there were ninety-four counties in Guangdong) successfully elected their own magistrates.\(^\text{127}\) In December 1921, the Guangdong Provincial Legislative Assembly passed “The Draft for the Guangdong Provincial Constitution” (\textit{Guangdongsheng xianfa caoan 廣東省憲法草案}),\(^\text{128}\)

or the people of the \textit{states}. This suggests that, in theory, the federation conceived by Chen was more centralist than the one designed by the U.S. founding fathers. Edling, \textit{Perfecting the Union}, 40.


\(^{125}\) “Guoshi huiyi xianfa caoan (yizhong)” 國是會議憲法草案 (乙種), \textit{Dongfang zazhi 東方雜誌 Vol.19 Issue 21 (1922)}: appendix.

\(^{126}\) “Guangdongsheng zanxing xianzizhi tiaoli,” 1013-1026; “Guangdongsheng zanxing xianzhang xuanju tiaoli” 廣東省暫行縣長選舉條例, in \textit{Chen Jingcun nianpu}, 1027-1030.

\(^{127}\) \textit{Minguo Guangdong dashiji} 民國廣東大事記 (Guangzhou: Yangcheng wanbao chubanshe, 2002), 132.

\(^{128}\) The Draft for the Guangdong Provincial Constitution bore significant resemblance to the Hunan Provincial Constitution except for the order and details of a few clauses.
And on June 16, 1922, Chen Jiongming launched a coup d’état against Sun Yat-sen, who had repudiated the prevailing federalist attempts and insisted on unifying China through a military expedition.129

A consensus was reached among Chinese federalists in the summer of 1922, that is, a convention for federal self-government (liansheng huiyi 聯省會議), presumably similar to the U.S. Philadelphia Convention of 1787, must be summoned either in Changsha or Shanghai so that provincial representatives could coordinate and materialize their federalist plans.130 Indeed, the military strongmen in North China, Wu Peifu 吳佩孚 in particular, were not convinced by the idea of federal self-government; and worse still, the coup d’état resulted in further political and military uncertainty in the South. From 1923 onward, as Sun Yat-sen launched the National Revolution to annihilate the uncooperative regional military strongmen, such as Chen Jiongming and Zhao Hengti, and to unify China by force of arms, the federalist movement gradually petered out. But the ideological and political dynamism of the movement cannot be denied. In August 1922, a special column in Shenbao stated – conspicuously on page three – that, “federal self-government has resonated with the public and constituted a political dynamic…. [the southern regional strongmen] dare not go against public opinion and therefore submit themselves to Zhang Taiyan’s leadership.”131 In the letter he wrote to Zhang Taiyan in the same summer, Chen Jiongming lamented the chaotic situation after the coup, but his confidence in federal self-government did not wane: “You [Zhang Taiyan] enjoy such high reputation today that your call will be echoed by all mountains and followed by all torrents – the national affairs of China will go as you have planned.”132

Conclusion

When Zhang Taiyan and Zhang Shizhao began their federalist journey, they held different attitudes toward Western political values and institutions. The political thought of the elder Zhang was one of paradox during the revolutionary period: On the one hand, he subscribed to the tenet of nationalism to endorse a revolution and to initiate a strong Chinese nation-state; on the other hand, he began to question Western modernity as a fundamental philosophical stance that sustained the axiom of evolution, equated knowledge-making with constant demarcation and classification, and internalized suppressive, centralized means to uniformize changes. Yuan Shikai’s dictatorial rule and a failed Chinese republic after 1911 encouraged him to abandon the extant nationalist and centralist elements in his thought and thereby to seek an alternative to Western political modernity. The younger Zhang had been a staunch proponent of Western political values and institutions until the late 1910s when he shifted the focus of tiaohet from liberalist political reconciliation in the parliament to cultural accommodation between old and new in the village. His earlier federalist ideas, despite emphasizing the neo-Confucian notion of “self-use of talent,” had largely echoed British parliamentarianism. But

“Guangdongsheng xianfa caoan” 廣東省憲法草案, 1-34, D921.02-342.1/3, Republican-period Collection, National Library of China.
129 Minguo Guangdong dashiji, 143, 155-156.
130 Chen, “Liasheng zizhi yundong,” 874; “Changsha tongxin” 長沙通信, Shenbao, August 9, 1922, 10.
131 “Zhixian sheng zhong zhi liansheng zizhi” 製憲聲中之聯省自治, Shenbao, August 14, 1922, 3.
132 Chen Jiongming, “Fu Zhang Taiyan dian” 復章太炎電, in Chen Jiongming Ji, 884-885.
after he returned from his trip to post-war Europe, he proceeded with a fresh search for an alternative to parliamentary democracy.

Although the two brothers now both promoted federalism as an alternative, their federalist thoughts and blueprints were underpinned by quite different cultural and philosophical motivations. Upholding self-government – that is, a bottom-up, spontaneous, and decentralized way of managing all affairs among locals and provincials – as its principle, Zhang Taiyan’s federal self-government aimed to correct the centralist and statist tendencies of Western parliamentary government on the one hand and to fulfil the Taoist notion of equality on the other. To Zhang Taiyan, “equality” was first and foremost a laissez-faire attitude toward differences and deviations, an attitude that was intrinsic to human nature but had diminished due to the constructed exigencies of evolution. Federal self-government therefore served as a suitable institution to restimulate this attitude and subsequently direct people “back” to true equality. Unlike Zhang Taiyan who negated evolution as a “truth,” Zhang Shizhao saw tiaohe between old and new as the very “truth” of evolution. The new federal system that he conceived, namely federal group self-government, thus sought to accommodate China’s cultural and political traditions and the emerging exigences of state-building. He advocated village self-rule – that is, a combination of traditional Chinese peasant economy and Confucian family rituals and ethical order – as the basis of his federalist reformation. Emphasizing the peasantry as the largest professional group in China, he was certain that the self-rule among peasants and the cultural merits of such self-rule would easily diffuse to other professions. And replacing election with examination, he hoped that the cultivation of local talents rather than their institutionalization would facilitate China’s federalist practice. Despite the influence of guild socialism, Zhang Shizhao’s political plan for federal group self-government was consistent with Zhang Taiyan’s idea on federal self-government: Both plans repudiated the centralization of power with government, parliament, and political parties, which, in their eyes, eroded Western parliamentary democracy, and both endorsed the most devolutionary or, in other words, federalist, manners of self-government – though the younger brother went even further in nullifying presidency, election, and any kind of political assembly.

Among the three prominent federalist leaders, Chen Jiongming was the only one who, as Duara states, relied on modern Western discourses and theories to legitimize his movement. Unlike Zhang Taiyan, Chen was a social Darwinist, and unlike Zhang Shizhao, Chen was a new culturalist. For Chen, a new culture must be invited to stimulate China’s progression toward “equal happiness.” Whereas Zhang Taiyan shunned the term “democracy,” Chen underlined it when delineating the nature of his village self-government. And whereas both Zhang Taiyan and Zhang Shizhao eventually deserted parliamentary politics, Chen modelled a “United Provinces of China” on the American political system. But this is not to argue that Chen Jiongming was not critical of Western modernity. Influenced by anarchist and Narodnik ideas, he also emphasized the Chinese tradition of village self-rule, which for him embodied the spirit of mutual aid as opposed to ruthless competition, as the crucial element missing from Western civilization. And ironically, despite his adoption of Western political concepts and institutions, his federalist project did not appear “radical” to everyone. John Dewey, a world-known American philosopher who made a lecture tour to Guangzhou in the spring of 1921, was deeply impressed with Chen Jiongming and his federalist plan. But to Dewey, the strength of Chen’s plan lay not in its resemblance to the American system but rather in its compatibility with
“Chinese temperament, tradition, and circumstance – feudalism is past and gone two thousand years ago, and at no period since has China possessed a working centralized government.”

John Dewey was perhaps the only thinker who directly associated fengjian with the Chinese federalist movement in a non-disparaging tone. But fengjian was only a term. Despite having discarded this term, Chinese federalists inherited fengjian as a Chinese tradition of local autonomy and as a late-Qing narrative of self-government: Zhang Taiyan still adhered the idea of the si despite his critique of fengjian; Zhang Shizhao paid acute attention to the relationship between self-cultivation and local self-government both during the Tiger period and after his ideological turn; even Chen Jiongming, as a proponent of village self-rule, was not entirely an enemy of fengjian. Furthermore, rather than reinterpreting fengjian along Western lines, they went beyond fengjian to critically engage with a wide range of ideologies – Daoism, Buddhism, social Darwinism, parliamentarianism, guild socialism, anarchism etc. – as they initiated and developed their federalist blueprints. Indeed, compromises were made, and imperfections still existed. Zhang Taiyan’s plan for federal self-government, despite posing a holistic challenge to Western modernity, still required institutions such as election and constitution; Chen Jiongming’s political blueprint not only compromised the principle of self-government laid down by Zhang Taiyan but also contradicted Liu Shifu’s anarchist attitude toward the state; and Zhang Shizhao certainly failed to elaborate how the agrarian culture could be transmitted to other professions and how a federation of professional groups could function alongside a federation of provinces. But it is undeniable that Chinese federalism was not simply a failed project of emulating the West. As this article demonstrates, not only did Chinese federalists propose sophisticated federalist ideas, but they also crystallized these ideas into concrete blueprints, laws, and actions. More importantly, although their federalist plans did not completely depart from Western political values and institutions, they nonetheless entailed a substantive critique of, if not absolute alternative to, Western political modernity.