

From Social Practice to Political Action: Civilization and Violence in the Making of Revolution

In the previous chapter we have elucidated the theme of military and physical education in the study society movement in Shanghai and the broader Jiangnan region. In particular, we have delineated the army rituals and sport activities as practiced in the study societies, which were intended to enhance the social solidarity and national identification of prospective Chinese citizens. In this way, however, militarism was largely conceived and improvised as a symbolic gesture integral to the project of society-making and nation-building, and hence bearing little (if any) instrumental value for actual war and military campaign. While the organized violence of the army was hailed as the pillar of civilization and cement of society, popular violence was held to be responsible for the disastrous consequences of religious cases and the Boxer Rebellion. The schism between “civilized” and “barbaric” forces, however, became dubious when the nature and prospect of national revolution was subject to further debates.

In this vein we might recall the notions of “civilized revolution” and “civilized antforeignism” in late Qing revolutionary discourse. While the former sought to bring an end to corruptive government and the slavery of the people, the latter insisted on the importance of following international norms and universal principles in launching attacks against foreign

enemies. In both cases, unruly violence was taken to be the “other” of civilization, as it evaded rational self-restraints and brought about potential or actual damages to the collective interest of society, the nation and even the world. But a major issue remained unexplored here, that is, how these concepts were related to the practices and actions of study societies. From the perspective of intellectual history, these concepts were laid down in treatises and discourses that were more or less coherent in their meanings and implications. From the perspective of social and historical actors, however, the articulation of these conceptual repertoires with real and evolving situations was far from self-evident and unanimous. As such it always took time for study society members to arrive at a generally acceptable definition of what constituted a legitimate mode of resistance in the first place. Above all, the generic distinction between “civilized” and “barbaric” was equally conducive to associational and revolutionary practices. Whether the radical students would adhere to collective rituals or venture into military campaigns was dependent upon their shifting judgments on the proper target and scope of political action.

Seizing Independence, Ending Slavery: Civilizational Politics in the Patriotic Study Society

In the last chapter we have noted that “civilization” was represented as an arena of political struggle in the Educational Society of China. The theme figured even more prominently, however, in the Patriotic Study Society. Founded shortly after the Educational Society in 1902, the Patriotic Study Society originated in the escalating conflicts between students and teachers of the Nanyang Public School in Shanghai (*Shanghai Nanyang Gongxue* 上海南洋公學). Open confrontation broke out when the students complained about the prohibition against reading reformist newspapers and books, as well as their unfair treatments in the hands of the teachers. When two students were dismissed from the school, their classmates organized an open gathering and public speech to protest against the decision. The school manager was so offended that he decided to dismiss the whole class. With the help of Cai Yuanpei, then teaching in the

Nanyang School and presiding over the Educational Society of China, the one hundred or so dropout students were all transferred to the Society. These students eventually founded a self-teaching and self-governing school, which was the Patriotic Study Society.¹

According to its constitution, the Patriotic Study Society put a premium on “spiritual and military education,” as the various taught subjects were designed to cultivate sublime spirit and iron will among the students.² A glance at the syllabus, however, could readily find that it was comprised mainly of ordinary subjects like mathematics and history. The spiritual and military elements were mostly found in physical education, whereby gymnastics was taught in every academic year and treated as a subject of prime importance.³ To supplement the formal inculcation of spirit and will, sports, speeches and public gatherings were part and parcel of the Society’s extracurricular activities.

Following the Educational Society of China, the chairman, manager, treasurer, teachers and other executive positions of the Patriotic Study Society were all openly elected by the students. The only deviation from the principle of self-government was its financial dependence on the Educational Society, which was responsible for the provision of school facilities such as lecture halls, student hostels and gymnasiums.⁴ But later this was precisely one of the rationales for the self-governing group to separate from the Educational Society in order to fully implement the “civilized” principle of independence.⁵

Like other returning Chinese students from Japan, the members of Patriotic Study Society were active in editing journals and disseminating political views. Its edited journals included the renowned *Su Bao* 蘇報 (Jiangsu Daily),⁶ *Jingzhong Ribao* 警鐘日報 (Alarming Bell Daily),⁷ and the *Tongzi Shijie* 童子世界 (Child’s World)⁸ among others. The Society had also founded and run the *Aiguo Nüxuexiao* 愛國女學校 (Patriotic Women School), with the purpose of promoting the education and independence of women, which amounted to the autonomy and solidarity of half the “four hundred million people” of China.⁹

With the above background and characteristics, the Patriotic Study Society was widely recognized as the pioneer of a successive wave of student

dropouts and protests, and hence the exemplary model for the radical study societies in Shanghai and the Jiangnan region. The formative experience of conflicts and struggles in the Nanyang Public School was framed in terms of civilization and its enemies. More specifically, it was interpreted as the open resistance of enlightened, progressive students against their authoritarian teachers and schools, whose violent repression of freedom and rights only revealed their “slavery,” that is, dependence and subservience to their corruptive masters in the Qing government.¹⁰ For this reason, the founding of Patriotic Study Society was celebrated as the “Memorial Day” of the incipient Chinese nation, and alternatively as the declaration of independence of “New China” (alluding New England) from the Old World.¹¹ Freedom and independence were prerequisites of *qun* or society, as they were indispensable for the preservation of Chinese nation against the alien and barbaric Manchu regime.¹²

This framework of understanding, experience and action was taken over by the Study Society for Encouragement (*Lizhi Xueshe* 勵志學社) and the Study Society for Improvement (*Gaijin Xueshe* 改進學社), which were initiated by the dropout students of the Academia of Hangzhou (*Hangzhou Daxuetang* 杭州大學堂) and the Huilan Academy (*Huilan Xuetang* 蕙蘭學堂). Inspired by the Patriotic Study Society, these two societies bore the solemn responsibility of opposing the “slavery education” of official and gentry-founded academies, and in this way combating the authoritarianism of the Qing government.¹³ Society members were also expected to dispel religious superstition and expulse foreign intruders. Above all, it was the calling of the students and their compatriots to transform themselves into a society of citizens, on the basis of which a free and independent New China could be made to stand firmly on the stage of world history in the twentieth century.¹⁴ Similar motifs were found in other student-based study societies in Jiangnan.¹⁵

As such, the peculiar experiences of the Patriotic Study Society were generalized into a performative paradigm of civilizational politics, in which study societies were seen as encapsulating and reenacting the struggles of the Chinese people at various levels. In the first place, student dropouts and protests were typically attributed to the “slavery” treatment of students by school managers and teachers, which were depicted as “corrupt,”

“authoritarian,” “barbaric” and even “unhygienic and dirty.”¹⁶ The barbaric acts of the academies were then enumerated, like the prohibitions against reading progressive newspapers and even the usage of “Sunday” or “rest day.”¹⁷ The teachers were openly denounced and classified as “uncivilized” and “semi-civilized” in accordance with their level of stubbornness and opposition against the rights and freedom of students.¹⁸

From the perspective of civilized and radicalized students, the barbaric qualities of new-styled academies were rooted in the unholy alliance of teachers, gentry and merchants with the authoritarian government. As put in a student commentary on the turbulence of the modern education sector in China, “the academies were nothing but the sterile employees of the corrupt and authoritarian government.”¹⁹ In struggling with the authoritarian regime and its allies, a network of study societies was formed under the patronage of Patriotic Study Society. This counter-alliance supported the founding of self-teaching schools and study societies among dropout students,²⁰ provided them with temporary hostels,²¹ and exposed the “authoritarianism” and “barbarism” of their academies in its organ journals.²²

As the struggle with Qing government and its educational representatives were couched in political and moral terms, student radicalism and study societies were elevated as the pillar and cornerstone of civilization. Here the theme of universal competition in the broader civilizational discourse provided the much needed legitimation for student activism: “Western nations could attain the current level of civilization only by virtue of destroying the Old Regime and founding a new one. Students have always been involved in the process.”²³

While this statement ran close to an ideological justification of revolution, its iconoclastic overtone was considerably played down by the general emphasis on military and physical education as a radical *but non-violent* means of cultivating civility and approaching civilization. When the drop-outs of the Military Academy of Jiangnan (*Jiangnan Lushi Xuetao* 江南陸師學堂) decided to move to Shanghai and join the Patriotic Study Society, they compared themselves to the Americans who sailed away from the tyranny of Britain’s colonial rule and eventually initiated the lengthy and bloody struggles for independence. But their analogous

situation and struggle with the alien Qing regime might not entail as much bloodiness as they imagined. Instead of launching revolution or other violent actions, the radicalism of these students was considerably tamed in their incorporation into the Patriotic Study Society. While self-learning and self-government were supported, the knowledge, trainings and experiences they acquired were predominantly oriented to the promotion of self-discipline and collective spirit.²⁴

Born of student protests in the new-styled academies, the Patriotic Study Society and its affiliates in Shanghai were unquestionably radical and “revolutionary” in orientation. In upholding “civilization” as their constitutive principle, however, these study societies stayed largely within the confine of non-violence, to the extent that their radicalism often only amounted to a critical attitude towards the “barbaric” government and its allies. To be sure assassinations of Qing officials were planned and executed, but they were mostly done by particular individuals and anarchist intellectuals (for discussions on Chinese anarchism, see Dirlík 1993 and Zarrow 1990). In the case of study societies, the self-appointed mission to popularize education revealed a skeptical (if not condescending) attitude towards the “lower society,” which was still widely regarded as the source of blind antireignism and impulsive violence.²⁵ While the radical study societies had made significant progress in practicing and institutionalizing equality, in much the same way as the reformist gentry these privileges were by and large reserved for the “middle society” of students and the educated. The continuity between the sociological perspectives of reformists and students was reflected in the interchangeable use of *qun* and *shehui* in this early period. Such a latent elitism was repudiated only with a subsequent reinterpretation and revaluation of popular violence and its relationship to “civilization.”

To Fight or Not to Fight: Tension between Association and Militarization

The problem of violence began to loom large when the Patriotic Study Society together with the Educational Society of China was launching