**equality /平等(Píng Děng)**

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| Chinese Perspective | CUI Zhiyuan | 09 Jun 2022 |

To understand the concept of “平等/Equality” in China is not an easy task, since there exists no corresponding triad to the European one of liberty, equality and fraternity to locate this concept. Moreover, there are competing conceptions of equality, both in China and in Europe, both in history and in contemporary time.

In this entry, I propose that Alexis de Tocqueville’s distinction between “social equality” and “political equality” can help us to make sense of the Chinese concept of “equality” both in historical and modern times. This famous distinction can be found in Tocqueville’s “Democracy in America”:

“Equality can take root in civil society without having any sway in the world of politics. A man may have the right to enjoy the same pleasures, enter the same professions, meet in the same places; in a word, to live in the same way and to seek wealth by the same means, without all men taking the same part in the government.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Obviously, from the earliest dynasties of the Xia, Shang and Zhou (about third millennium BCE) to the last dynasty of the Qing (1644-1911), there were no political equality of modern sense (understood as citizenship rights and equal chance of political participation through universal suffrage) to speak of. Confucius (551-479 BCE) and his followers believe that human beings are unequal by nature, so a hierarchical structure of politics and society is justified. However, he leaves a space for equal opportunity of education by saying “In education there should be no class distinctions”[[2]](#footnote-2) ( “有教无类” ). As Ping-ti Ho and others have shown, the imperial examination system indeed has increased social mobility of many talented, but low-class origin, people, especially since the Song Dynasty (960-1279)[[3]](#footnote-3). This is consistent with the famous Naito Hypothesis (内藤湖南假说) that Chinese aristocracy has permanently declined during the Tang-Song Transition[[4]](#footnote-4), thus the Chinese modernity (in the sense of “social equality” , that is, no legal barriers to hold office by birth distinctions) began with the Song Dynasty.

Another example which illustrates the usefulness of Tocqueville’s distinction between “social equality” and “political equality” is the difference of surnames in China and Europe. According to the British historian Gregory Clark,

“The problem with measuring social mobility in China using surname distributions is that the Chinese have few surnames, and these surnames have been employed for millennia. There are estimated to be only about four thousand surnames in use among Han Chinese. The hundred most common Chinese surnames are held by nearly 85 percent of the population, with the three most common Chinese surnames, Wang (王), Li (李), and Zhang (張), held by more than 270 million people (21 percent of the population)…In England and Wales, by contrast, in 2002 there were 270,000 surnames shared by five or more people. Because almost all Chinese surnames are so common, they typically carry little information on the social status of their holders.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

This much higher isonymy in China, by itself, does not immediately demonstrats that there is more “social equality” in China than in Europe. Since it may be the case that “the small number of surnames is related to the small number of the Chinese characters in the Chinese language; Chinese surnames often consist of a single Chinese character, and only several thousand Chinese characters are commonly used”[[6]](#footnote-6). However, more important thing for our understanding of “social equality” is the fact that many Chinese surnames have more than 4000 years history. Today, 97 of the 100 most common surnames in China originated in the Spring and Autumn Period (476-221 BCE)[[7]](#footnote-7). As Gu Yanwu (1613-1682) emphasizes in his famous “Record of Daily Knowledge” ( “日知录” )， Chinese started to use surnames for aristocracy as early as the period of Five Emperors ( from 2697 to 2597 BCE )[[8]](#footnote-8). After surname (姓)and clan name(氏) were merged into one in Han Dynasty (from 202 BCE to 220 AD), most Chinese commoners have their surnames as well. In sharp contrast, England only started to use surnames after the Norman Conquest (1066). For non-aristocratic commoners, the surnames came even later[[9]](#footnote-9). It is in this sense of use of surnames by the commoners, not the high isonymy per se, that we can say, without too much distortion of Tocqueville’s original intention, China had some kind of “social equality” in its long history, because the aristocracy declined relatively earlier in China, in comparison to Europe.

Tocqueville’s distinction between “social equality” and “political equality” can also shed light on the modern China. According to the eminent Chinese-American political scientist Tang Tsou, the modern Chinese revolution led by the Chinese Communist Party reversed the sequence of development of the three elements of citizenship identified by the leading British sociologist T.H. Marshall in Europe. These three elements are civil, political and social-economic rights. “The formative periods of these three elements were respectively 18th, 19th and 20th centuries”[[10]](#footnote-10) in Europe. In other words, civil and political rights developed first and social-economic right afterward in Europe. But the sequence in the modern China is the opposite: social-economic right was given priority in the Chinese Communist Party led revolution and state building after 1949, while civil and political rights are still underdeveloped, to say the least.

Tocqueville’s big insight in making the distinction between “social equality” and “political equality” is that democracy is not only a political regime, but a social state of life (*l’état social démocratique* ). There is a mutual spill over tendency between social equality and political equality.For example, before the outbreak of the Covid-19, many Chinese passengers often sat next to taxi drivers, even if the back seat is empty. This shows a lack of social distance due to the consciousness of hierarchy. This kind of “social equality”, under modern conditions, may spill over to the development of the consciousness of “political equality”.

Two political developments illustrate this potential movement from social to political equality. One is that two China's leading tech companies are setting up labour unions for their staff as the industry comes under intense political pressure to rethink how it treats its workers[[11]](#footnote-11). Another is China’s 2010 Amendment to the Electoral Law of 1979[[12]](#footnote-12). We certainly hope to see more movements toward political equality from social equality in China.

On the other hand, there seems to be a spill over movement from political equality to social equality happening in Europe today. The distinguished French political theorist Rosanvallon echos Tocqueville’s distinction of social and political equality in his 2011 book “La société des égaux” by saying: “But the “people,” understood in a political sense as a collective entity that ever more powerfully imposes its will, is less and less a “social body.” Political citizenship has progressed, while social citizenship has regressed"[[13]](#footnote-13). The popularity of Thomas Piketty’s book “Capital in the 21st Century” may be a reflection of this tendency moving from political to social equality in today’s Europe.

Let us hope Tocqueville’s distinction between “social equality” and “political equality” will make China and Europe understand each other at a deeper level, and the mutual spill over effects between “social equality” and “political equality” will lead a better world.

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* trans. Gerald E. Bevan (London: Penguin, 2003), p.584 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This translation is due to a distinguished Chinese historian Ping-ti Ho, see his “The Ladder of Success in Imperial China: Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368-1911”, Columbia University Press, 1962, p.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. David Stasavage, “The Decline and Rise of Democracy: A Global History from Antiquity to Today”, Princeton University Press, 2020, p.154. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hisayuki Miyakawa, “An Outline of the Naito Hypothesis and Its Effects on Japanese Studies of China”, The Far Eastern Quarterly, August 1955,pp.533-552. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gregory Clark, “The Son Also Rises”, Princeton University Press, 2014, p.170. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Liu Yan, et al, “A Study of Surnames in China through Isonymy”, American Journal of Physical Anthropology, vol.148, 2021, pp.341-350. This article gives the latest data in 2012 on the number of surnames in China: 7327 surnames among 1.28 billion people. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Yuan Yida and Zhang C, “Chinese Surnames: Community Heredity and Population Distribution”, East Normal University Press, 2002 (in Chinese) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Gu Yanwu, “Record of Daily Knowledge and Collected Poems and Essays: Selections”, Translated and edited by Ian Johnston, Columbia University Press, 2017, Section 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. P.H.Reaney, “The Origin of English Surnames”, Routledge, 1967,p.315 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Tang Tsou, “Marxism, the Leninist Party, the Masses and the Citizens in the Rebuilding of the Chinese State”, in “Foundations and Limits of State Power in China”, edited by Stuart Schram, European Science Foundation, 1987, p.266. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/02/tech/china-didi-jd-labor-unions-intl-hnk/index.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In the Electoral Law of 1979, the population represented by a rural delegate is 4 times as high as the population represented by one urban delegate. In the 2010 Amendment, equal proportion of rural and urban representation is stipulated. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Pierre Rosanvallon, “The Society of Equals”, Harvard University Press, 2013, p.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)