**progress/进步(Jìn Bù)**

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Many terms in vernacular Chinese existed in classical Chinese, yet they have taken on a qualitatively different meaning in the modern context as a result of the meeting of East and West. The term “progress” can be said to have its current accepted equivalence in “进步” (*jinbu*) in Chinese; however, there are major differences between its usage in classical Chinese compared to its usage since the latter part of the 19th century.

In its original form and meaning, the character “進” (*jin*) has been found as early as in the Oracle bone script (甲骨文) during the Shang Dynasty 商朝 (1600 to 1046 b.c.). It is composed of two parts, “隹” and “止”. “隹” looks like a short-tailed bird, and “止” denotes the shape of a foot. One interpretation is that as “footprints of a bird”, it means “steps forward”, as a bird is unable to walk backwards, and its footprints clearly point ahead. Another interpretation is that 追逐进denote chasing after humans, animals and birds, respectively. The same meaning, “to advance”, was stated in the first lexical work of Chinese characters, *Shuowen Jiezi* (《說文解字》) (25-220 a.d.).



As terms are often best understood by their juxtaposition with other terms, the pair for “forward” and “backward” is “進-退”. “退”, according to the Oracle bone script, is composed of two parts: “皀” and “夊”. “皀” is a food vessel, and “夊” is a foot turned backward, the reverse of “止”. The character “退” denotes departure or withdrawal after taking food.



Thus, while “进” (“moves forward”) contrasts with “退” (“moves backward”), the latter is not necessarily derogative. When the two terms denote physical movements, and especially in tactics of war, “advancing” would certainly be preferable to “retreating”. In *Daodejing* 《道德经》written by Laozi (老子) during the Warring States period (475 to 221 b.c.), “明道若昧，進道若退” (“The Dao, when brightest seen, seems light to lack; who progress in it makes, seems drawing back”),[[1]](#endnote-1) the word “progress” is contrasted to “drawing back”. It is similarly presented by邓析Deng Xi (545-501b.c.), founder of Chinese 名辩之学 (“school of logic”) in his famous idiom “不进则退，不喜则忧，不得则亡，此世人之常。” (“Not forward-moving, one stays behind; not being happy, one is worried; not taking gains, one loses; this is normality in worldly matters.”) 朱熹Zhu Xi (1130-1200 a.d.), in his 理学(“rationalism”), popularized the saying “凡人不进则退也。” (“One who does not advance, lags behind.”)

The term “进步” acquired a meaning much different from the sense of “progression” when China encountered Western aggression. Near the end of the 19th century when reformists in China proposed Meiji-style reforms, “progress” was inscribed on Chinese society by the modernity of the West. Despite the slogan “中学为体，西学为用” (“Chinese essence and Western utility”), modeling on and catching up with the West was the primary pursuit.

Translators played a vital role in promoting such ideas. Notably, 严复Yan Fu exerted immense intellectual influence in the introduction of Western thought to China. In 1897, he translated and published[《天演论》](https://baike.baidu.hk/item/%E3%80%8A%E5%A4%A9%E6%BC%94%E8%AB%96%E3%80%8B/4331)(*Evolution and Ethics and other Essays*) written by English biologist Thomas Huxley (1825-1895). Huxley shared more commonalities than differences with Charles Darwin (1809-1882), who authored *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859). Darwin later replaced “natural selection” with the phrase “survival of the fittest”. When Yan Fu translated Huxley, the terms “progress” and “evolution”（进步/进化）were interchangeable. As for the term “evolution”, Yan Fu sometimes rendered it as “天演” (“cosmic process”). When the term “progress” took on the meaning of “evolution” in the context of “survival of the fittest”, it imposed a linearity in the perception of social development, with Western civilization and science unequivocally occupying a place of superiority as a higher stage of social evolution.

When [梁启超](https://baike.baidu.hk/item/%E6%A2%81%E5%95%93%E8%B6%85)Liang Qichao, who advocated constitutionalism for the Qing Dynasty, theorized his proposal for《新中国未来记》(*The Future of New China*) (1902), he was explicit about Social Darwinism: “因为物竞天择的公理，必要顺应着那时势的，才能够生存。” (“The principle of survival of the fittest compels compliance with the trend of the times in order to survive.”) Liang’s article “论进步” (“On Progress”) collected in 《新民说》(*New People*) (1902-1906) juxtaposed “求进步” (“striving for progress”) with “救危亡” (“surviving collapse and extinction”).

This linkage between “progress” and “evolution” continued with prominent intellectuals after the 1911 revolution. 陈独秀 Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), editor-in-chief of《新青年》(*New Youth*), in his manifesto “敬告青年” (“Call To the Youth”) (1915) urged young people to be “进步的而非保守的” (“progressive rather than conservative”). He favoured French evolutionist philosopher H. Bergson (1859–1941), and he would refer to Bergson by saying that “A progressive rather than conservative life is like sailing against the current; if you do not advance, you will fall back. This is an axiom in China. From the fundamental law of the universe, there is no reason to conserve the status quo, as the evolution of all things is constant… In terms of the evolution of human affairs, the nation that remains unchanged from the past degenerates day by day, while the people who seek progress with innovation are flourishing. The fate of survival or collapse can be anticipated.”

While Liang’s evolutionary ideas came from Huxley, Chen’s came from Bergson. “Progress” is counterposed to “conservatism”. Closely associated with the idea of “evolution”, “progress” is linked to perceptions that propound different stages of social evolution and revolution (abrupt changes not excluded), such as from feudalism to capitalism, then socialism, and eventually communism. Interestingly, with the Russian Revolution of 1917, the most “advanced” model of progress was perceived by some as shifting from U.K. and France to the U.S.S.R. Chen and李大钊Li Dazhao were co-founders of the Chinese Communist Party. In 1918, Li published an article “庶民的胜利” (“The triumph of the common people”) in *New Youth*, exalting that the creation of the new era, though encountering difficulties, represented the progressive and irreversible trend. In his article “Bolshevism主义的胜利” (“The Victory of Bolshevism”) published in the same issue, Li quoted what Frederic Harrison said, “Latent in Bolshevism is a great social evolution, similar to the revolution of 1789…”, and Li was convinced that “with the mass movements of the world, the remnants of history, such as emperors, aristocrats, warlords, bureaucrats, militarism, capitalism, and all that block the progress of this new movement, will be destroyed with the force of thunderbolts.”

Regardless of whether it would be the bourgeoisie or the proletariat that took power, the economic substance of such “progress” was still conceived primarily as development of productive forces and industrialization supported by advancing science and technology. Within Chinese Marxist thinking, Karl Marx’s optimism about socialism was growing out of capitalist potentials.

After WWII, the concept of “progress” became inextricably tied to the concept of “development”, with Harry Truman’s inaugural speech as U.S. president in 1949 defining a new era of “development”. Not only is “development” postulated as the unilinear way of social evolution, “underdevelopment” is also denigrated as backward and shameful; however, this mindset denies social and cultural diversities of different traditions and induces a rejection of one’s own past. Critique about this kind of developmentalism has been well presented, for example, in *The Development Dictionary* and *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*.[[2]](#endnote-2)

For China, the concept of “progress” has by and large been similarly bound with that of “development” conceived mostly in terms of scientific advancement, economic growth, and military strength. In practice, China has struggled with the predicaments and consequences of the development trap.[[3]](#endnote-3) By the early 21st century, China’s “progress” had come under attack by the West, led by the U.S.A. in the unfolding of a New Cold War, as an answer to China going beyond its assigned, subordinate positions in the global capitalist division of labour. China’s “progress”, instead of receiving compliments, is presented as a threat to the world order and must therefore be contained. At the same time, the crises of global capitalism have been worsening, with financial bubbles, climate collapse, food insecurity, energy crunch, pollution, pandemics, and ever-growing social polarization. It is no longer absurd to think that humanity could be heading rapidly to collapse and even extinction. The formulation of “progress” with its web of meanings is falling apart and failing.

In much the same way that Bolshevism was hailed in the early 20th century as representing a more advanced phase of humanity, a century later, concepts such as “生态文明” (“ecological civilization”) and “共同富裕” (“common prosperity”) have been postulated in China. This new orientation goes beyond the concept of “progress”. Though a century-old wedlock between “progress” and evolution, science, development, and modernity cannot be readily disentangled conceptually, in reality, China has many rich and diverse traditions that have been “conserved”. Thus, by scrutinizing the historical context in which the pursuit of “progress” has been embedded, by revisiting local and indigenous experiences that have been labelled as “backward” and “regressive” but have persisted, an embodiment of values and meanings, including dignity, happiness, contentment and self-sufficiency, in the very concept of “progress”, can be reached, rejecting its linear and artificial attributes. Certainly, “progress” cannot be survival of/for the fittest. It must go beyond “survival” and signify processes of transformation in which the will to spiritual as well as physical betterment constitutes the driving force for change.

1. *The Tao Te Ching*, translated by James Legge, 1891 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://shifter-magazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/wolfgang-sachs-the-development-dictionary-n-a-guide-to-knowledge-as-power-2nd-ed-2010-1.pdf> and <https://www.academia.edu/39692614/_Pluriverse_A_Post-Development_Dictionary_AUF_2019_._NEW_BOOK_edited_by_Ashish_Kothari_Ariel_Salleh_Arturo_Escobar_Federico_Demaria_and_Alberto_Acosta._Download_full_ebook_for_free_PDF_._License_Creative_Commons> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Wen Tiejun, *Ten Crises: The Political Economy of China’s Development (1949-2020)*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)