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From the Group Comes the Nation: China's First Mass Political Organization, the Baohuanghui

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By Jane Leung Larson

We recently learned that the Chinese government has deemed the term "civil society" [*gongmin shehui* 公民社会] [too sensitive to use in Chinese news reports](#). Apparently, even the mention of Chinese citizens voluntarily joining together for a common cause challenges the authority of China's rulers, especially when that cause is political. Such aversion to autonomous organizations goes back to imperial China, and it was not until the last throes of the Qing dynasty that the first truly political Chinese organization emerged and grew. And that organization had no choice but to be based outside of China.

Chinese civil society took a big step forward in 1899 with the founding of the Chinese Empire Reform Association, or the Baohuanghui 保皇会 (literally the "Protect the Emperor Society"), in Victoria, Canada. In effect a proto-political party, the Baohuanghui was founded on the premise that the first step in reforming China was the launching of an organization of like-minded Chinese who believed in its mission and would support a variety of methods, from uprisings to newspapers, to achieve their goals. This kind of voluntary association, or *qun* [群 group], was distinguished from the traditional Chinese organizations that formed around native place, clan, guild, or religious identities, which only reinforced the cliquishness and infighting of Chinese people. From the *qun*, it was hoped, would come the *guo* [国 the nation].

The Baohuanghui became the largest and most influential overseas Chinese political organization during its late Qing heyday, far surpassing Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary groups in scope and influence, both inside and outside China. By 1905, more than 150 chapters had been established in Chinese communities in North and South America, Southeast and Northeast Asia, Australia and even Africa, totaling perhaps 100,000 members with a broad reach into China. Its ultimate objective—transforming China's autocratic system into a constitutional monarchy, much like that of Great Britain or Japan—failed, but it was crucial in spreading the acceptance of constitutionalism, nationalism, and popular sovereignty among Chinese both outside and inside China.

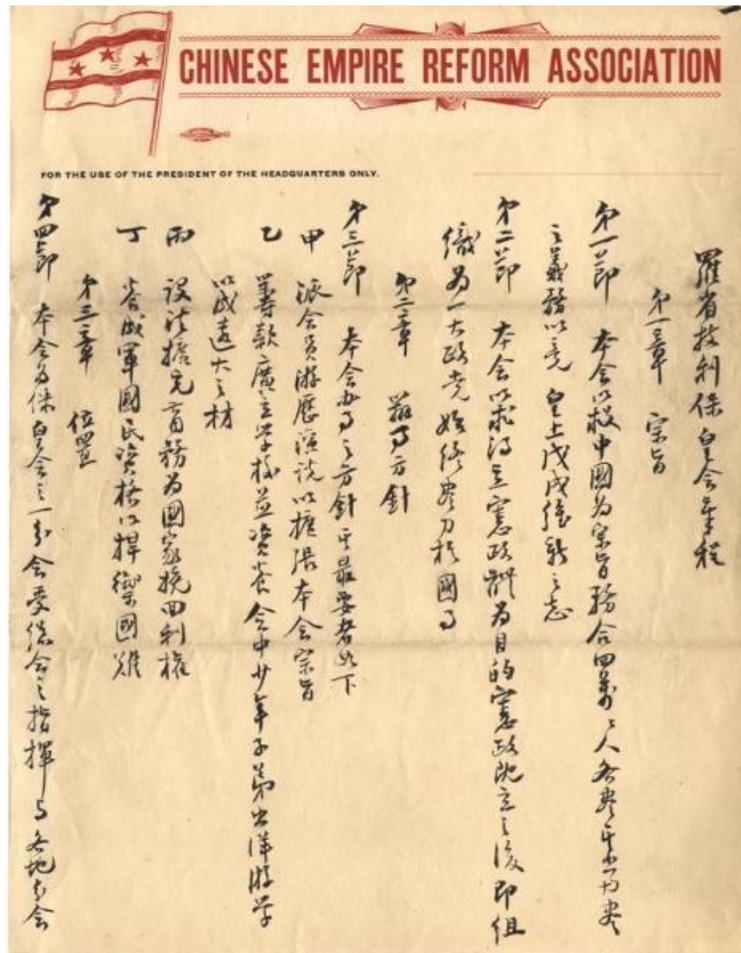
How did the Baohuanghui arise, expand so rapidly among overseas Chinese, and get its message inside China? And why has it received so little attention by scholars of modern Chinese political history?

The origin of the Baohuanghui lies with the Hundred Days of Reform of 1898, a turning point in Chinese politics that was noted by the drafters of Charter 08, among them 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo. Charter 08 asserts: "The first attempts at modern political change came with the ill-fated summer of reforms in 1898, but these were cruelly crushed by ultraconservatives at China's imperial court." Charter 08 ends by calling for those who feel the same sense of crisis and responsibility for China's future to join in a citizens' movement to "bring to reality the goals and ideals that our people have incessantly been seeking for more than a hundred years."

The "ill-fated reforms" initiated by the Guangxu Emperor between June and September 1898 were intended to launch the political and economic renovation of an autocratic empire by turning it into a constitutional monarchy that gave some measure of popular sovereignty to Chinese citizens. Overly ambitious in scope (110 edicts issued in 103 days) and undercut by inept political moves that raised the hackles of powerful court officials, the reforms were abruptly halted with a coup by Empress Dowager Cixi, who had stepped aside as Regent for the young Emperor but remained the power behind the throne. She put the Emperor under house arrest for the rest of his life and executed six of his advisors.

China's "first attempts at modern political change" did not end in 1898. The Emperor's leading reform advisors, Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, escaped China with prices on their heads and one year later, founded the Baohuanghui, with Kang as President and Liang as Vice President. Kang, Liang, and other

key leaders began traveling the globe, stressing the urgent need for political reform in China and setting up Baohuanghui branches.



Baohuanghui Vice President Liang Qichao wrote the Charter of the Los Angeles chapter in 1903 on official letterhead.

The charter of the Los Angeles chapter, written by Liang Qichao on his visit to the U.S. in 1903, described the Baohuanghui's goals: "This association aims to save China. The efforts of each of the 400,000,000 Chinese people must be combined in order to carry out the Emperor's 1898 reforms. The purpose of this association is to establish a constitutional government. After the constitutional government is established, we will form a large political party that will always exert itself in the affairs of the nation."

Quite consciously, with the intention of preparing members to create and lead a modern nation, Baohuanghui leaders fashioned an organizational identity that echoed a national identity, including a charter or constitution, a flag, badges, rules for meetings, and elections. The organization's members also visibly represented "China," unlike the memberships of most domestic reform organizations during the Qing, which were composed of gentry, merchants, and returned students. Baohuanghui chapters, though generally headed by merchants, were far more inclusive, with, for example, laborers making up a large part of the membership in the United States.

The Baohuanghui's structure was in itself an experiment in political participation. When Liang Qichao drafted the charter for the Los Angeles chapter, he apologized for "putting in too many details in the section on meeting procedures. This is because Chinese people never had any rules for holding a meeting, and therefore a meeting often ends up with no decision or resolutions. This charter takes the meeting rules of Western meetings of all kinds as a model, and we Chinese should learn from them."

As to members, the charter states: "Any patriotic Chinese is qualified to join the association at any time. People may register as members regardless of their surname, native place, or religion."

The romance of the association is reflected in group letters from Baohuanghui chapters, like this one from the Hartford, Connecticut branch, written in 1902 to their comrades in other cities: "The first priority is to enlighten people if one wishes to save China from its dangerous predicament. In order to enlighten people, the most important thing is to form mass organizations and associations. . . . Newspapers are the vanguard to provide people with knowledge. Commerce is the foundation of people's finance. Education is for the germination of talent. These all need to be accomplished so that we can carry out the mission of reform."

Newspapers, commerce and education were incorporated into the organizational structure to reach out beyond the Baohuanghui's members—through an international network of civil and military schools, a program to fund overseas study, and a business conglomerate that included publishing and translation companies, newspapers, banks, hotels, restaurants and streetcar lines. There also were early attempts to carry out assassinations and uprisings in China in order to restore the Emperor to his throne (all of which failed), and later more successful efforts to mobilize major nationalistic movements including the anti-American boycott of 1905 and anti-Japanese boycott of 1908.

Overseas Chinese found the Baohuanghui's moderate political agenda of special appeal, and its political program, focused as it was on making China competitive in the modern world, gave them hope as they looked with increasing distress upon their beleaguered homeland. The Baohuanghui ideology has been called an early expression of Chinese liberalism, a middle way that joined the interests (and freedoms) of individuals to public and national interests—advocating constitutionalism, rule of law, representative government, civil and human rights, limitations on the power of government authority, opposition to autocracy, and economic modernization. These ideas had begun circulating in China in the 1880s, but only with the Hundred Days of 1898 did they form a template for action, which was further developed by the Baohuanghui and their reform allies in China.

After the disastrous Boxer Uprising and the ensuing burden of foreign indemnities, the Empress Dowager finally was convinced that constitutional reform was imperative to China's survival, and by 1905, constitutionalism was broadly accepted as the proper path for China. In Peter Zarrow's words, "when even officials had become constitutionalists . . . what was once radical had become mainstream" (Introduction, [Creating Chinese Modernity](#)).

Much of the credit for making constitutionalism a mainstream idea must go to the masterful propaganda of Kang, Liang, and their disciples, who changed the medium as well as the message heard by the Chinese people. The Baohuanghui made innovative use of speeches, political rallies, circular telegrams, and petitions, but most influential were the newspapers read far beyond their immediate geographical locations, which included the U.S., Canada, Japan, the Philippines, Burma, Siam, Java, Hawaii, Mexico, and China. With his aptitude for adapting Western concepts like constitutionalism and citizenship to a Chinese milieu, Liang Qichao took the lead in founding, editing, and writing for Baohuanghui-funded papers like *New People's Miscellany* [Minxin Congbao] and Shanghai's *Eastern Times* [Shibao]. Liang probably had the widest readership of any journalist in the late Qing, and even Mao Zedong hung on his every word as a young man.

His biographer, Kung-chuan Hsiao, described Kang Youwei as "an insistent reformer believing in the possibility of perfection through progress." But Kang was adamant that progress should be gradual, moving step by step in China from autocracy to constitutional monarchy to democracy, although the pace he sought quickened as the Qing began to implement its plans to transition to constitutional government. In 1907, Kang changed the Baohuanghui's name to the Xianzhenghui 宪政会, or Constitutional Association. He spoke openly about when the organization might return to China as a full-fledged political party. In 1908, Liang Qichao transferred an affiliated political organization, the Political Information Society, or Zhengwenshe 政闻社, from its overseas base in Tokyo to Shanghai. Both organizations moved to the forefront of a national petition movement that urged the Qing to delay no longer in convening a parliament to debate and promulgate a constitution. Kang drafted a lengthy petition that claimed to be signed by overseas Chinese in "200 different cities, representing

several hundred thousand people." Although Kang's petition was deemed "absurd" by the Qing court and the Zhengwenshe was shut down for "pretending to study current affairs while secretly pursuing the provocation of unrest and harming national security," the wave of constitutionalism and yearning for political participation quickly outgrew the ability of the Qing government to meet reformers' expectations. Three years later, China's imperial system was gone.

Why did the Baohuanghui, which broke ground in the development of Chinese civil society, fade into obscurity in Chinese political history? Most obviously, the Baohuanghui's identification with the monarchy left it on the sidelines with the coming of the 1911 Republican revolution, while its role in spreading the acceptance of constitutionalism, nationalism, and popular sovereignty was quickly forgotten. The Baohuanghui became an emblem of reaction and counter-revolution in Republican and Communist China, and only when Deng Xiaoping brought reform back into fashion (and by implication suggested that the Qing reform movement might have some relevance to the present) did research on Kang, Liang, and the Baohuanghui take off. Most scholars of Kang and Liang touch only incidentally on their lives and writings as Baohuanghui leaders, even though the organization's activities consumed the two men during the Qing's last decade. Finally, those who study the Baohuanghui as a transnational organization must incorporate scholarship on both the histories of China and of the Chinese diaspora. For all these reasons, there have been only a handful of books devoted to the organization and none to its development worldwide.

Interest in the Baohuanghui is slowly building. For instance, historian Zhongping Chen of the University of Victoria has begun to survey archives in North America, bringing a fresh interpretation of the Baohuanghui and its origins in Canada. With the help of a Chinese colleague, Chen Xuezhong, I have established a collaborative online forum, [Baohuanghui Scholarship](#)—it includes postings on new research developments, a bibliography, scholars currently doing research in this area, archival sources around the world, and [Mapping the Baohuanghui](#), which charts the locations of chapters, newspapers, schools, women's associations, and businesses around the world. An exhibition this spring at the Hong Kong Museum of History on [the 1911 Republican revolution](#) will include a section on the contributions of the Baohuanghui. Also coming this year is a docu-drama that gives considerable attention to the Baohuanghui, *Datong (Great Society)*, directed by New York-Hong Kong filmmaker Evans Chan and narrated by Swedish Chinese theatre artist Chiang Ching.

Jane Leung Larson began research on the Baohuanghui in the mid-1980s after the papers of her grandfather, a student of Kang Youwei and founder of the Los Angeles chapter, were re-discovered fifty years after his death. Among her publications is "Articulating China's First Mass Movement: Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, the Baohuanghui, and the 1905 Anti-American Boycott" (Twentieth-Century China, November 2007).

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