

Turning Crisis into Opportunity:

An Essay on the Cultural Preconditions of Contemporary Crisis Mentality through a Conceptual Analysis of *Weiji*

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Abstract

This study inquires into the cultural preconditions of a popular conception in contemporary societies characterized by the idea of turning crisis into opportunity. Building on Reinhart Koselleck's thesis regarding the conceptual origins of modern crisis mentality in European cultures, this paper presents an analysis of the conceptual history of *weiji* 危機 (the Chinese word for "crisis") in the Chinese cultural-historical context using the Jin-Liu Database Method. I argue that the history of *weiji* and its modern transformations are compatible with Koselleck's basic theoretical framework relating "crisis" and "modernity." The modern use of *weiji* originated in the late Qing reform movement, which saw the emergence of a discourse and widespread consciousness of Chinese nationalism. The proliferation of *weiji*-talk found in Chinese public press during the thirty-

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year period 1895-1925 was indicative of larger cultural transformations involving changes in the cultural conception of history. Within this context, the concept of *weiji* became drafted into ideologies of nationalism, republicanism, and Communism, the operation of which all depended on the new cultural mentality regarding the nature of historical change as linear and man-made. For this reason, the conceptual histories of “*weiji*” and “crisis” could be said to have converged during the 20th century on the basis of a deeper convergence of their underlying cultural conception of history. This convergence has provided an important cultural precondition for not only the pervasive idea of turning crisis into opportunity in contemporary societies but also the emergence and evolution of powerful ideologies including nationalism, communism, industrialism, capitalism, and scientism in modern China.

Keywords: crisis, *weiji*, modernity, conceptual history, cultural conception of history, nationalism, database method

將危機化為機遇：

以「危機」概念史分析當代危機觀念的文化前提

雷穎秋琪

摘 要

本文探究的是流行於當代社會「將危機化為機遇」之觀念的文化前提條件。從以萊因哈德·柯塞勒克（Reinhart Koselleck，1923-2006）為代表的德國概念史出發，本文對比了中國和西方的「危機」概念史，並運用數據庫方法考察了這一概念在近代中國的形成和演化。分析得出的結論是，「危機」的概念史，尤其是它在近現代時期的發展，基本符合柯塞勒克對“crisis”與西方現代性起源之關係所提出的理論框架。「危機」在現代中文裡的用法起源於晚清的改革運動以及隨之興起的關於中國民族國家的言論及意識。「危機」言論從1895至1925年間在中文輿論中的擴張，反映出了波及到文化歷史層面的深層文化轉型。「危機」作為一個單獨的概念，被捲入了包括民族主義、共和主義、共產主義在內的各種意識形態之中，成為了關鍵辭彙；而這些意識形態又都根植於現代社會在形成過程中所展現出的深層歷史觀念架構之上。正因如此，只有在中國與西方歷史文化觀念趨同的基礎上，“crisis”和「危機」的近代演變軌跡才能說是趨同了的。這種趨同不僅是「將危機化為機遇」這種觀念在當代社會普及的文化前提條件，也是民族主義、共產主義、工業主義、資本主義、科

學主義等強大意識形態能在中國生根發芽的觀念基礎。

關鍵詞：危機、現代性、概念史、觀念史、文化歷史觀、民族主義、
數據庫方法

Turning Crisis into Opportunity:

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1. Introduction

Among contemporary Chinese concepts, perhaps few have so firmly captured the imagination of Western audiences as the concept of *weiji* (危機), also known as the Chinese word for “crisis.” John F. Kennedy famously noted in a speech delivered on April 2, 1959 that, “When written in Chinese, the word ‘crisis’ is composed of two characters. One represents danger and the other represents opportunity.”¹ The idea that crises are not inherently bad because they present opportunities for positive change is an attractive one. We see the rhetoric routinely employed by politicians, businessmen, academics, motivational speakers, and writers, as if “crisis” and “opportunity” indeed go hand in hand. A neologism, “crisitunity,” has

¹ John F. Kennedy, “Remarks at the Convocation of the United Negro College Fund, Indianapolis, Indiana, April 12, 1959.” John F. Kennedy Library and Museum. http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/JFK/JFK+Pre-Pres/189POWERS09JFKPOWEES_59APR12.htm (Accessed February 11, 2009)

even been coined to reinforce this idea.

Many China scholars, especially linguists, consider the formulation “crisis = danger + opportunity” a gross misinterpretation of the Chinese word *weiji*. Sinologist Victor Mair argues that this “widespread public misperception” is in part due to wishful thinking, but mostly reflects a fundamental misunderstanding in the West about how the Chinese language works. He points out that the character *ji* has dozens of meanings in Chinese and usually does not signify opportunity. When combined with the character *wei* (危), *ji* (機) means “incipient moment” or a “crucial point.”² The meaning of the compound *weiji* is thus a “dangerous moment.”² Mair may be correct in his explication of *weiji*, but the curious fact is that interpreting *weiji* as an opportunity that comes with danger is, in fact, actually quite popular in China as well. A search on the Chinese web turns up almost ten million references to the formulation of *weiji* as the combination of *weixian* (危險, danger) and *jiyu* (機遇, opportunity).³

What explains the prominence and pervasiveness of this idea in contemporary crisis discourse such that our societies act upon it with consummate fervor and conviction? To reflect on this question, it is first necessary to scrutinize the premise that “*weiji*” is the Chinese word for “crisis.” As far as translating “crisis” is concerned, “*weiji*” is one of many viable terms. Then why is “*weiji*” regarded as the unmistakable Chinese equivalent of “crisis?” What constitutes this Chinese conception of crisis? To what extent do “*weiji*” and “crisis” carry parallel semantic implications and cultural connotations?

² Victor Mair, “danger + opportunity ≠ crisis: How a misunderstanding about Chinese characters have led many astray.” <http://pinyin.info/chinese/crisis.html> (Accessed February 11, 2009)

³ Search on baidu.com as of May 3, 2012.

In posing questions in this way, my intent is to highlight the interpretive dimension of crisis phenomena in a comparative mode. The premise is that the act of referring to an event as a “crisis” or “*weiji*” constitutes a particular way of seeing the world, which connects directly to how conditions in the world are experienced and acted upon. The emphasis on interpretation indicates the analytical relevance of the “lifeworld,” or that which is shared or taken-for-granted in culture.⁴ Since our perception, experience, and value judgment of crisis phenomena all take place within the web of social meaning, the lifeworld provides the cultural preconditions for interpreting and experiencing crises.

To what extent do “crisis” and “*weiji*” constitute parallel interpretive lenses in their respective cultures? To answer the question, I build upon German historian Reinhart Koselleck’s important work on conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*) and his treatment of the concept of “crisis” in European cultures through tracing the history of “*weiji*” in the Chinese cultural-historical context. While the project draws insights from Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte* research program, a modified research and analytical methodology, here referred to as the Jin-Liu Database Method, is used. The purpose of the analysis is to lay the foundation for determining the extent to which the two concepts converged in the modern period, reflecting on the cultural preconditions of the convergence, and discussing its social theoretical implications for understanding ideas about crises in relation to modernity.

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, “Preface,” in *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1. (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1984).

2. Reinhart Koselleck on the Conceptual History of “Crisis”

According to Koselleck, the history of “crisis” goes back to ancient Greek. Originally, it signified the turning point in a fateful process, which called for a definitive and irrevocable decision. It had clearly defined meanings in the sphere of law, theology, and medicine, which implied strict alternatives between success or failure, right or wrong, life or death, and salvation or damnation.⁵ In the early modern period, the meanings of crisis expanded into politics, economics, history, and psychology. The expansion in the variety of meanings attached to the concept has continued up to our own time, where its inflationary use now covers virtually all areas of life.⁶

Koselleck locates the historical and cultural roots of pervasive crisis-talk in the modern world in 18th-century Europe. In that context, the concept was pressed into service by the social and cultural critics who espoused the Enlightenment ideal of reason to express a new conception of history as a linear movement for which the past held limited reference for the future. Central to his argument is the observation that the spread of the mentality that history was an unscripted, unguided, and therefore manmade process provided the cultural preconditions for the political success of

⁵ Reinhart Koselleck, “Some Questions Regarding the Conceptual History of ‘Crisis’,” in Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, ed., T.S. Presner and others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 236-47.

⁶ Reinhart Koselleck, “Crisis” [translation of “Krise” in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexicon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, eds. Otto Brunner, Werner Konze, and Reinhart Koselleck, 8 volumes; (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972-97), vol. 3, 617-50], trans., Michael Richter, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67 (2006): 357-400.

those who embraced the Enlightenment mentality. It was against this underlying conception of history that the critics' prognosis of "crisis" was able to eventually play a role in bringing down the *ancien régime*.⁷

In today's world, the crisis of 18th-century Europe has long gone, but the habit of mind to see the world through the lens of "crisis" has remained with us. Koselleck thinks that underlying our propensity to *crisify* virtually all aspects of life is an inherently modern conception of how the world works through historical time, which dates back to the birth pangs of modernity. He tells us that as a cultural legacy of the emergence of Western modernity, our obsession with the notion of crisis presupposes a conception of history that is forward-looking yet sees no identifiable pattern extending into the future. The concept of "crisis" has become "a structural signature of modernity," because it was written in its genetic code.

3. Research Question Restated

An important cognitive gain from knowledge about the processes which give rise to conceptual frameworks under which experience is interpreted and acted upon is that it allows such frameworks to be contextualized and problematized. In so far as questions about "crisis" are concerned, Koselleck had shown that they could not be answered in terms of a category of experience that transcended cultural and sociopolitical contexts. The question is not what crisis *is* as a definable type of occurrence but rather *why* a crisis is diagnosed and *how* the putative crisis

⁷ Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (New York: Berg, 1988); Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans., Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

makes us think or act along certain lines. Such inquiry prompts further questions about alternative possibilities for understanding our conditions in the world and for interacting with the basic arrangement of our politics and society.

One way to begin to look for answers to such questions is to, through utilizing different linguistic resources, examine how various cultures or societies conceptualize some of the same major changes as well as disparate local experiences in the last three hundred years. To do so, the method of conceptual history can be applied in a cross-cultural and translanguing comparative mode. Koselleck anticipated this line of inquiry as part of his vision of the *Begriffsgeschichte*, as he considered comparisons using the method as a natural outcome of this research approach. Every language incorporates through translation words from foreign languages. This is especially true of basic concepts.⁸ Indeed, historians in the Netherlands, Hungary, America, and China have initiated a number of comparative inquiries in recent years.⁹

In the following sections, I present my analysis of the conceptual history of “*weiji*” to serve as a springboard for comparing “crisis” and “*weiji*” in their respective cultures. The results will help test the hypothesis that our perception and experience of that which we call “*crisis/weiji*” today are culturally conditioned, interpretive phenomena with deep historical roots in the emergence of modernity.

⁸ Reinhart Koselleck, “A Response to Comments on the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*” in *The Meaning of Historical Terms and Concepts: New Studies on Begriffsgeschichte*, ed., Hartmut Lehman and Melvin Richter (Washington D.C.: German Historical Institute, 1996), 69.

⁹ Melvin Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

4. Methodology

To analyze the history of “*weiji*,” one needs to trace the origins, changes, and continuities in the meaning and usage of the term “*weiji*” in classical and modern Chinese. The basic task is to identify when the term first came into common usage, what it meant, how it was used and not used, and how its meanings and usages have changed or remained the same over time.

4.1 Source Collection

The primary research tools utilized in gathering sources are searchable full-text Chinese databases. The basic research procedure involves database searches for the keyword “*weiji*” and compilation of the search results (usually in the form of excerpts containing the word and their citation details). Given the availability of databases suited to the task, I examine texts that fall into three time periods—pre-19th century, 19th century to the first quarter of 20th century, and mid-1920s to the present.

For pre-19th century texts, the main database used is the *Wenyuang* (文淵閣) edition of the *Siku quanshu* (SKQS) (四庫全書) (*Complete Library of the Four Treasuries*). A second database, the *Guo xue bao dian* (GXBD) (國學寶典) (*National Learning Treasures*), is used to supplement the SKQS.

Texts from the second period are drawn exclusively from the “Database for Studies in Chinese Intellectual History (1830-1930)” (DSCIH).¹⁰ The database contains six categories of texts: modern periodicals (newspapers, journals, magazines) (報刊), official publications (檔案), Qing Compendium on

¹⁰ The DSCIH was developed by the Research Center for Contemporary Chinese Culture at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Statecraft (清代經世文編), books and treatises by Chinese authors (論著), works in Chinese by foreign authors (including missionary works in Chinese) (來華外人中文著譯), and late Qing textbooks on Western learning (晚清西學教課書).¹¹ Since its creation in 1997, the database has incorporated texts on a continuous basis and boasts content that currently totals over 130 million words.¹² Each data sample consists of the sentence(s) in which the term occurs in an original text, the text's date (if applicable), authorship (if applicable), and publication and citation details.

The task of collecting and analyzing all excerpts containing the word “*weiji*” in texts contained in databases becomes much less feasible for texts from the 1930s to the present. The sheer volume of available sources makes this kind of analysis impractical. For studying the concept's contemporary meaning and usage, therefore, only the full-text database of the *People's Daily* (1946-2006), the major state newspaper of the People's Republic of China, is selected given its undisputed representativeness of standard written Chinese.

In addition, I also cross-reference databases as well as print editions of dictionaries.¹³ Database collections of dictionaries usually carry the most recent editions. As a result, they are not ideal for tracing changes in the definition and usage of terms. Print editions of dictionaries from different time periods help remedy this flaw since they record the common or standard understanding of terms at the time of their publication.

¹¹ Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng, *Studies in the History of Ideas: The Formation of Important Modern Chinese Political Terms* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2008), 463-477.

¹² Jin Guantao, email message to the author, October 26, 2008.

¹³ A full list of dictionary references can be provided upon request to author.

4.2 Jin-Liu Database Method

Using the DSCIH, historians Jin Guantao and Liu Qinfeng have produced the most systematic and comprehensive studies in the history of modern Chinese social and political concepts attempted by any China scholar. It should be noted that Jin and Liu see their work as an exercise in *guannian shi* (觀念史) (the history of ideas), as distinguished from *sixiang shi* (思想史) (the history of thought). They define *guannian* (觀念) (idea) as an idea or thought expressed through one or more keywords or sentences containing the keyword(s). A thought contains a multitude of meanings and can be conveyed using different words and phrases. By contrast, an idea is the crystallized form of its underlying thought. This definition of “idea” resembles Koselleck’s definition of “concept” as a thought or idea that encapsulates a multitude of meanings. For the purposes of this study, therefore, Jin and Liu’s research methodology, referred to here as the “Jin-Liu Database Method,” is treated as the Chinese counterpart of Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte* and adopted as a model reference for the semantic analysis of “*weiji*.”¹⁴

The Jin-Liu Database Method consists of the following steps:

- 1) Search and select the keyword(s) that capture an idea and use the database to collect sample sentence(s) containing the keyword(s).
- 2) Sort the data by date and count the keyword’s frequency of occurrence by year/decade/century, depending on analytical scope and interest.
- 3) Meaning analysis of sample sentences: Locate the sentence in original text. Read the sentence and surrounding sentences and

¹⁴ Jin Guantao and Liu Qinfeng, 2008, 3-8. Also: “Studies of the Origins of Modern Chinese Thought and Database Methodology.” *Shixue yuekan* (Journal of Historical Science) 5 (2005): 89-101.

paragraphs in order to determine the meaning of the term in context. Construct semantic models that represent the range of meanings and usages of the term.

- 4) Record and count the frequency of occurrence of each semantic model in source data to determine the semantic distribution and transformation in meaning and usage over time.
- 5) Tabularize and graph count results.
- 6) Further analysis based on above steps. The analyst can use other data, such as people, events, discourse, citations related to an idea, to construct specialized database for meaning analysis in order to assess the influence of these variables on the history of the given idea.

4.3 Semantic Modeling of Weiji

In today's grammatical terminology, the word *weiji* 危機 is a "compound" of the characters *wei* 危 and *ji* 機. While interpreting the compound by its parts to mean "danger" and "opportunity" is not incorrect, it is only one among many in a diverse range of semantic possibilities captured by the term.

Most modern Chinese dictionaries classify the character *wei* as an associative compound (*huiyi zi* 會意字), combining two characters in one to represent a person (人) atop a cliff (厶) with a crouching figure below, implying height and danger. It can be used as a verb, noun, adjective, or adverb. As a verb, it can mean to fear height; to dread or fear; to injure or endanger; to perish or suffer defeat; or to doubt. As a noun, it can signify a dangerous or ominous state; difficulty or hardship; the ridge of a roof; one of the twenty-eight stars in classical Chinese astronomy; or a relatively rare last name. Its meanings as an adjective include being tall or high; dangerous or

perilous; precipitous; dying or in a critical state; tight; upright (in posture); or crooked. Finally, as an adverb, it means almost.

Ji is classified as a pictophonetic character (*xingsheng zi* 形聲字) with one element indicating meaning (木) and the other sound (幾). It also has a wide array of definitions. As a noun, it can mean the name of a tree; a small table or supporting structure; the rear works of a cross-bar (i.e. the trigger); a military apparatus; a trap (used for hunting); an engine or machine; a spinning machine; the name of the third star of the Big Dipper; a pivot or critical point; cause(s) of change; a sign of change or omen; an opportunity; a (military) stratagem, scheme, or idea; an aptitude or talent; a secret; the joints connecting the hip bone to the thigh bones; or a plane. As an adjective, it can mean swift or agile; dangerous; or strange.

These laundry lists of the definitions of *wei* and *ji* found in modern dictionaries are evidence that the characters each had a long history of evolution in the Chinese language. The polysemous nature of these two constitutive parts of *weiji* gives the term a fluid and expansive semantic quality. By taking different combinations of the multiple strands of meanings of *wei* and *ji*, the compound can be taken to mean anything from a “sign of danger” to a “fearsome trap” to “danger and opportunity.” Among the term’s diverse semantic possibilities, however, only a small number are actually operational in application to a given historical context. As far as conventional usage goes, *weiji* has never meant a “difficult talent,” for example.

I analyze the semantics of the keyword data from the above-mentioned databases in three steps. The first is close reading of all the sentences in which the term *weiji* occurs, analyzing its meaning and manner of application. Based on the first step, I construct a set of distinct semantic models or alternatives. Then, I revisit each sample to determine

the meaning of *weiji* based on the context of the sentence or paragraph in which it occurs and assign it a semantic type.

The third step is applicable only to data from the DSCIH, since they can be sorted precisely by year over a 90-year period. The SKQS dataset is not suited for this type of analysis because precise dates of the sources are mostly unavailable. Usually we know the century in which a book was first written or compiled. But the processes of textual transmission during the age of manuscript culture are such that a piece of writing could undergo a long period of alteration before its form and content became stabilized and standardized. This makes dating of the sources a less useful and reliable way of tracing the history of a term. The best we can do with the SKQS data is probably to examine the earliest appearances of the term, the types of sources in which it occurs, and the ways it was used compared to contemporary usage.

The semantic models are entered as separate columns into an Excel spreadsheet containing all the DSCIH keyword search results. Each sample is examined and the column cell under the model to which the term's meaning in context corresponds most closely is marked "1" and the rest "0." The number of times each semantic type occurs are counted by year and merged into one timetable. The table is then graphed to show the comparative frequencies with which these semantic types occur over time.

Compared to Koselleck's semantic categorization of "crisis," which highlights its temporal, theological, and historical-philosophical dimensions, my analysis of *weiji* focuses on the term's conventional usage, or the commonly found manner in which the term is deployed. This may include the parts of speech (i.e. verbs and modifiers) with which it is usually associated, the kinds of contexts in which it is evoked, and the set phrases or sayings in which it occurs. My rationale is that changes

and continuities in conventional usage can serve as proxies of evolving understandings and interpretations of the objects, events, conditions, and ideas, which the concept is evoked to capture.

In constructing and applying the semantic models of *weiji*, I make a distinction between definitional meaning and contextualized meaning. Definitional meaning is the commonly understood meaning of a concept, consisting in abstract conceptions of an idea, thing, or type of event or condition. The semantic content of the contextualized meaning, on the other hand, is specific to the context in which the concept is evoked. Whereas the semantic models of *weiji* are a combination of distinct definitional categories and categories of conventional usage (or modes of application), I base the assignment of semantic type on the term's contextualized meaning and mode of application.

Table 1 lists the eight semantic models that I have developed here. While they are presented in distinct definitional terms, they are not rigid or mutually exclusive categories of meaning. At best, they are ideal types that represent a spectrum of variations in the conception and deployment of *weiji* in practical usage, and serve mostly an analytical purpose.

Table 1. Semantic Models of *Weiji*.

Mode of Application		Definitional Meaning
M1	Perceptive	Hidden, unseen danger; lurking threats 潛伏的禍患（害）或危險
M2	Anticipatory	Imminent disaster即將降臨的災難
M3	Mechanical	Dangerous, harmful device (e.g. military weapon, hunting tool) 危險的機關

M4	Mechanical-Metaphorical	Dangerous scheme, disadvantageous circumstance 危險的圈套、不祥的境遇（機關比喻）
M5	Situational/Conditional	A critical or threatening state of affairs, situation, circumstance 危局、嚴重困境（狀態）
M6	Eventual (pertaining to events)	Disaster, disastrous event, severe difficulty or problem 災禍、危難、困難（事件）
M7	Temporal/Transitional	Critically dangerous moment of change or pressing difficulty 危險緊急的關頭（時間）
M8	Causal	Root, cause, or source of trouble禍患的根源

5. An Outline of the Conceptual History of *Weiji*

5.1 “*Weiji*” in Classical Sources (pre-19th century)

Keyword search in the SKQS returned 1119 items, in which the term *weiji* appears a total of 1242 times. Of the 1119 items, 56 are from the Classics division (*jing* 經), 141 from the History division (*shi* 史), 144 from the Philosophy division (*zi* 子), and 778 from the Literature division (*ji* 集). The earliest sources in which the term occurs are from the History and Philosophy divisions. The frequency and distribution of the term’s occurrence in the SKQS suggest that it was a common usage in classical literary Chinese.

Weiji’s earliest appearances in extant writings are found in a 3rd-century personal correspondence “Letter to Xi Maoqi” (*Yu Xi Maoqi shu* 與嵇茂齊書) and a 4th-century Daoist masters text the *Outer Chapters of the Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (*Baopuzi waipian* 抱朴子篇). The term also

occurs in half a dozen history compilations, including the *History of the Song* (*Song shu* 宋書; 5th century), *History of the Southern Qi* (*Nan Qi shu* 南齊書; 6th century), *History of the Wei* (*Wei shu* 魏書; 6th century), *History of the Northern Qi* (*Bei Qi shu* 北齊書; 7th century), *Southern History* (*Nan shu* 南書; 7th century), and *Northern History* (*Bei shu* 北書; 7th century). Several other earliest texts, the 6th-century Buddhist anthology *Propagation of the Light* (*Hongming ji* 弘明集) and its 7th century sequel *Expansion of the Propagation of the Light* (*Guang hongming ji* 廣弘明集), also contain the term.

These earliest textual appearances suggest that *weiji* was of medieval origin and came into common usage during the early medieval period (3rd to 7th centuries). Its absence in all of the earliest writings—especially the texts in which we would expect to find it, such as the *Book of Changes* (*Yi jing* 易經), the *Art of War* (*Sun zi bingfa* 孫子兵法), the *Western Han Historical Records* (*Shi ji* 史記)—indicates that from high antiquity up to the 3rd century, this particular term was not used to express ideas of threat, change, crisis, or others with which it later became associated with.

Occurrences in the earliest medieval sources are too scarce for us to make conclusive statements about the term's original usage, however, available evidence indicates that *weiji* was first used to mean unseen danger. In the “Letter to Xi Maoqi,” for example, the line containing *weiji* reads, “[I] often fear the shock of latent turbulence and stealthy occurrence of unseen danger” (*Changgong fengbo qian hai, weiji mi fa* 常恐風波潛駭, 危機密發). Here, *weiji* is paralleled with latent turbulence and described as danger occurring in a hidden manner.

Between the 4th and 7th centuries, six different semantic types appeared in the sources. They include the eventual, anticipatory, mechanical, and mechanical-metaphorical, situational, and temporal

modes of application. The earliest eventual mode of application is found in an imperial edict titled “Conferring territory to general Xu Shibiao” 封徐世標, written by Shen Yue 沈約 (441-513), an influential literary figure and powerful court politician in the Liang dynasty. It reads, “Recently the traitors secretly stirred up trouble, and suddenly a crisis broke out” (頃讎慝潛煽, 危機驟發). The *History of Jin* includes an essay that uses *weiji* in a situational sense— “[At this moment] the situation is critical” (廢徒之際, 交有危機之急). The terms *jiaoyou* 交有 (crossed with) and *ji* 急 (urgent) convey a strong sense of urgency with regard to a present ongoing condition. In the *History of the Wei*, one of the earliest examples of the mechanical-metaphorical usage is found in the phrase *dong weiji* 動危機 (trigger/touch *weiji*), which implies getting into trouble. The two above-mentioned Buddhist anthologies also contain two early uses of *weiji* in the mechanical and mechanical-metaphorical modes. The line in *Propagation of the Light*, “set the killing device out of site” 設危機於幽伏, uses *weiji* to refer to a weapon employed in a military operation. In the *Expansion of the Propagation of the Light*, the sentence “Warriors [use] deadly weapon, fighting is full of dangers [or, dangerous traps]” 兵者兇器, 戰實危機 can mean both literally deadly devices used in war and metaphorically as dangers associated with war. Finally, an early example of the temporal usage can be found in the phrase “seizing the critical moment” 乘此危機 in the *History of the Zhou* (*Zhou shu* 周書; 7th century).

During its early career, therefore, *weiji* was primarily used in a politico-military context. A closer examination of the content of these above-mentioned writings finds that *weiji* was used invariably in reference to deadly political schemes and strategic military setups.

The scanty sources preserved from this period may not allow precise dating of when each of these semantic types first came into usage. But

a speculative suggestion can be made about why the term expanded in meaning and types of usage during this period. The fourth century was one of the greatest ages of translation in Chinese history. With official endorsement of the Northern Wei (386-535 AD) and Former and Latter Qin (386-417 AD), Buddhism made unprecedented advances in China and secured a strong foothold relative to Confucianism and Daoism. The translation of Buddhist scriptures, supported by the royal courts and supervised by eminent monks, was carried out on a large scale. Numerous old Chinese terms were adapted and new terms (especially compounds) created to translate Sanskrit words.¹⁵ The variations in *weiji*'s meaning and usage seen in the sources were possibly due in part to the large-scale linguistic transformations that occurred during this period.

In the centuries that followed, the six early medieval usages continue to occur in the sources, with innovations in phraseology as well as expansions in context of application. The mechanical-metaphorical usage, which is by far the most frequently seen semantic type in classical sources, is a case in point. Within this category, there developed a dozen variations in application. Between the 7th and 18th centuries, associations with verbs including *dong* 動 (to move/trigger), *chu* 觸 (to touch), *dao* 蹈 (to stamp on), *lü* 履 (to tread on), *jian* 踐 (to trample) *ta* 踏 (to step on), *fu* 赴 (to go to), *tuo* 脫 (to escape from), and *po* 破 (to break out of) all became conventional applications. In addition to references in politico-military contexts, the notion of *weiji* as a dangerous scheme, disadvantageous circumstance, or simply trouble, had by the late medieval period also become common in writings about social life. In the *Spoken Principles of*

¹⁵ Ma Zuyi. "History of Translation in China," *An Encyclopedia of Translation: Chinese—English, English—Chinese*, ed., Chan Sin-wai and David E. Pollard. (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1995), 373-87.

Master Zhuang (*Zhuangzi kou yi* 莊子口義; 13th century), for example, there are references to *weiji* that pertain to the condition of being in the world.

An interesting case of semantic development is the evolution of the phrase “when in poverty one often hopes to be rich; once rich one inevitably steps into trouble” 貧賤常思富貴，富貴必踐危機, which first appeared in the 7th-century *Southern History*. This line was appropriated and rephrased in a number of later sources and became somewhat of an adage by the 12th century. In a couple of sources—*Collected Writings of Wen Tianxiang* (*Wen Tianxiang ji* 文天祥集; 13th century) and *Complete Song Dynasty Lyrics* (*Quan Song ci* 全宋詞; compiled between the 17th and 19th centuries), this line was rephrased into “wealth and prestige have always been a source of trouble” 從來富貴是危機 and “wealth and prestige are inherently problematic” 富貴是(本)危機, respectively. Because the verb association in these instances reflects a sense of causality instead of a conception of entrapment, they represent the emergence of a different semantic type, which is termed *causal* here.

The foregoing survey of sources included in the SKQS and GXBD has shown that classical usages of *weiji* can be traced back to the early medieval period and that eight distinct semantic types had evolved prior to the 19th century. These semantic types were not static categories, however. Each of them underwent continuous transformations and came to overlap and cross path with one another.

While the sentence-based examination of usage does not allow us to answer specific questions about the term’s contextualized meaning or historical reference, it gives us a glimpse of the diverse and evolving conceptions of *weiji* prior to its modern connection with “crisis.” It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine in-depth the linguistic

mechanisms and historical conditions underlying the term's evolution in the classical period. What is important is that these "traditional" conceptions are all resources which later generations can use to (re)interpret and contest the meaning of *weiji*.

5.2 Modern Transformations of "Weiji"

Keyword search in the DSCIH turned up 995 items, of which 917 are dated (by year of publication for books and official documents and by date of publication for periodicals) and 78 undated. The dated items range from 1840 and 1928. The undated items mostly fall under the category of the Qing Compendium on Statecraft, published between 1827 and 1903. The sources before 1895 were mostly official records written by Qing state bureaucrats, while sources from 1895 onwards displayed greater diversity in authorship and a substantial amount of translated material. For analytical purposes, the dated and undated sources were separated into sub-datasets. Semantic analyses were performed on both datasets. Graphical analyses were performed only on the dated dataset (i.e. 1840-1928).

By source distribution, *weiji* occurs in all six categories of sources covered in the DSCIH, with its occurrences in newspapers, magazines, and journals being the most frequent. It appeared at least once in 27 of the 35 periodicals carried by the DSCIH, the oldest of which began publishing in 1815 and the youngest published its last issue in 1928. The term's earliest appearance is in the issue of *Shiwu bao* 時務報 (*Chinese Progress*) on September 7, 1896. Five periodicals—*Xin qing nian* 新青年 (*New Youth*), *Xiang dao* 嚮導 (*Guide*), *Waijiao bao* 外交報 (*Journal of Foreign Relations*), *Xiandai pinglun* 現代評論 (*Journal of Current Affairs*), and *Qing yi bao* 清議報 (*China Discussion*)—featured the most frequent deployment of the term.

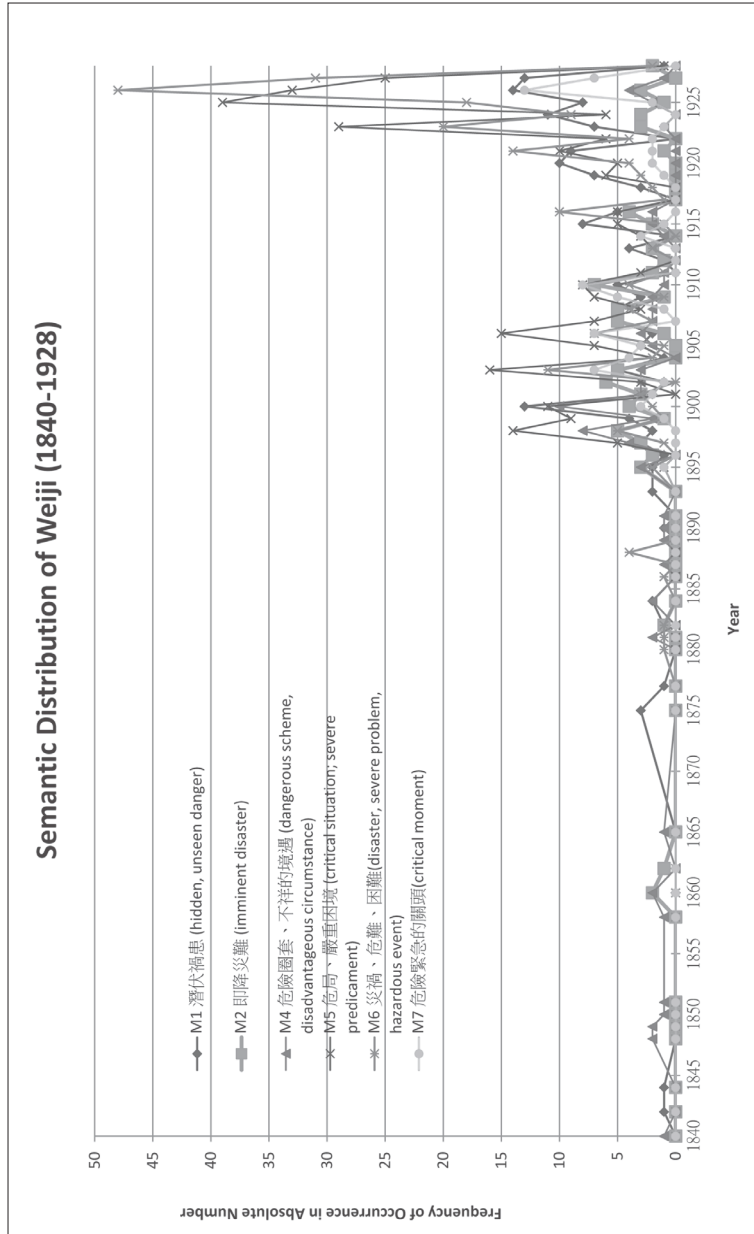


Figure 1. Semantic Distribution of Weiji (1840-1928).

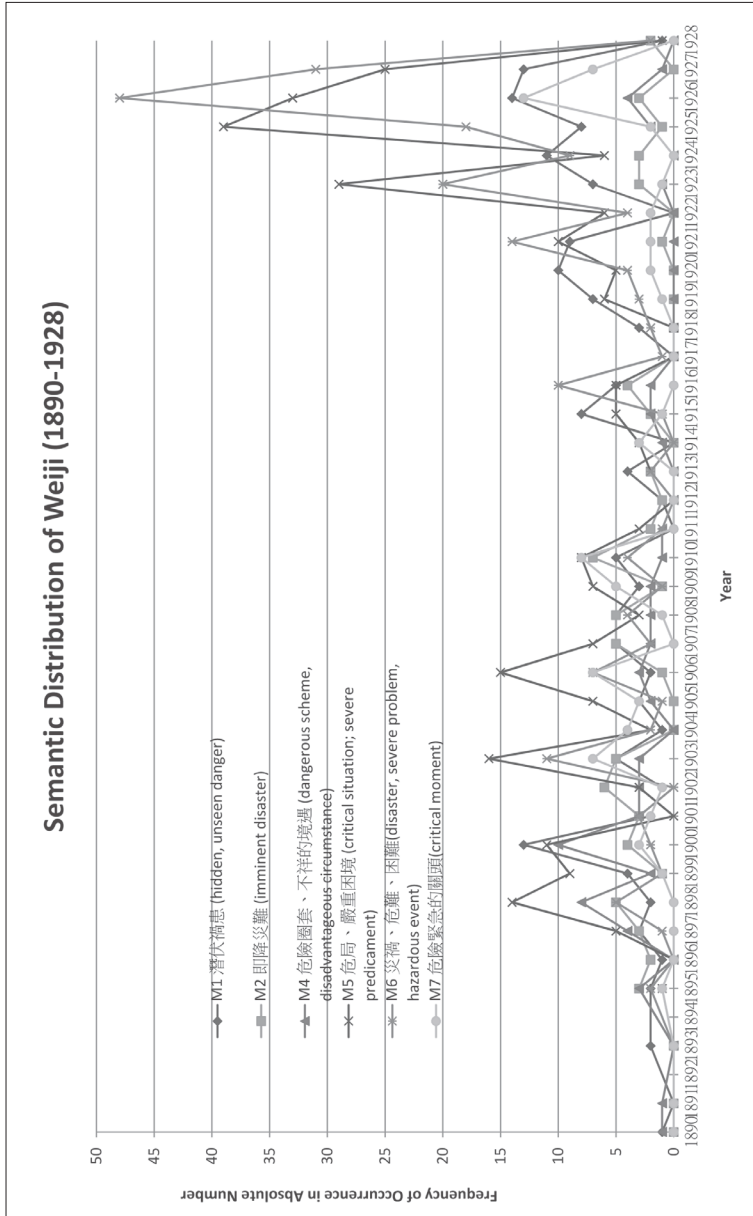


Figure 2. Semantic Distribution of Weiji (1890-1928).

Table 2. Semantic Change by Percentage of Representation.

Data Range % of Representation	M1	M2	M4	M5	M6	M7
1827-1903	19.2	23.1	29.5	17.9	2.6	7.7
1895-1928	20.8	14.0	7.9	27.1	21.2	9.0
Percentage of Change	+8.2	-39.5	-73.2	+50.1	+727.6	+17.6

The period from the late-19th to the early-20th centuries saw dramatic transformations in the usage and application of *weiji*. While no new meaning type emerged, the eight semantic types displayed contrasting careers (Figures 1 & 2; Table 2). M3 (dangerous device) and M8 (cause of dangerous change) did not occur in available sources from this period. While this does not prove that they had become moribund, it does indicate that they had become extremely rare in as early as the 19th century. In sources dated 1840-1895 the only operational semantic types were M1 (unseen danger), M2 (imminent disaster), M4 (dangerous scheme), and M6 (disaster, severe difficulty). Applications representative of M5 (dangerous situation) and M7 (dangerously critical moment) did not begin until after 1895. From 1896 to 1928, all six meaning types were operational, with M5 and M6 being the most predominant.

The percentages of change listed in Table 2 are remarkable for the exponential fashion by which M6 increased in application both in absolute number and percentage of usage. Also notable is the decline in M4, which was the most predominant meaning type in classical usage. M5 saw a substantial degree of increase in application, while M1 and M7 both showed moderate increases. In absolute number, M2 was among the more frequently occurring meaning types in both intervals. But in percentage of representation, it became much less prevalent in the 20th century.

On a qualitative level, the language in which *weiji* was used in sources dating from the early decades of the 19th century was markedly classical literary Chinese. The usages were largely consistent with those seen in the pre-19th-century sources. Texts from 1895 onward, by contrast, were increasingly written in vernacular Chinese. *Weiji* began to be used in ways never seen before. While the applications did not go beyond the frameworks of previously identified semantic types, their phraseology had been transformed.

This shift is most pronounced in the emergence and increasing prevalence of set phrases, in which *weiji* is used in conjunction with another compound or set of words to form a new compound. The associated compounds are nouns and, in many cases, foreign loan words imported via Japan. In the new compounds, they always precede *weiji* and serve as adjectives to modify it. Earlier examples in the development of set phrases had the link word *zhi* 之 (of) in between the associated compound and *weiji*, such as in the phrase *guojia cunwang zhi weiji* 國家存亡之危機 (crisis of national survival). In later examples, such as the phrases *jingji weiji* 經濟危機 (economic crisis), *minzu weiji* 民族危機 (national crisis), and *geming weiji* 革命危機 (revolutionary crisis), the compounds were directly joined.

The set phrases can refer both to ongoing conditions (M5) or specific events (M6). The increasing tendency to apply *weiji* in set phrases largely accounts for the increases of M5 and M6 in frequency of occurrence and percentage of representation. This trend, thus identified in the quantitative and qualitative analyses, strongly indicates that a tendency among Chinese writers to see conditions and events in the world through the lens of *weiji* began to develop and grew in great measures from the last years of 19th century to the first three decades of 20th century.

5.3 *Interpreting Weiji's Modern Transformations*

Weiji's modern transformations were closely tied to the intellectual, cultural, as well as socio-political changes happening in China at the turn of the 20th century. The dramatic semantic changes captured in the foregoing analyses occurred against the historical background of the late-Qing reform and revolutionary movements leading up to the collapse of the imperial state, and the later New Cultural Movement (1915-1925), which fostered the spread of Marxism-Leninism and saw the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (1921). In Figures 1 and 2, the year 1895 appears to be a year of transition. For China, it was indeed a major historical watershed that propelled a radical reform movement spearheaded by elite Chinese who became increasingly disillusioned with the Qing government amid devastating foreign aggression, peasant rebellion, and economic dislocation.

Jin and Liu argue that China's humiliating defeat in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-5; 甲午戰爭) resulted in the loss of appeal of the Confucian ideological complex (*rujiadaodei bukeyu* 儒家道德不可欲) among Chinese scholar-officials and gentry-literati and prompted them to embrace values opposite to orthodox values (*jiashinifan* 價值逆反). This unleashed what they consider to be the second most significant period of cultural fusion in Chinese history, in which foreign (mostly Western) ideas and practices were selectively absorbed and creatively reconstructed as the indigenous cultural tradition reacted to their influences.¹⁶

How did *weiji's* modern transformations figure in this process of cultural fusion of the Confucian cultural traditions and influx of Western

¹⁶ Jin Guantao & Liu Qingfeng, *The Origins of Modern Chinese Thought – The Evolution of Chinese Political Culture from the Perspective of Ultrastable Structure*, vol. 1, (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2000).

influences? As seen in the DSCIH data analyses, *weiji* became regularly deployed in discussions about national and international affairs after 1895. Liang Qichao (梁啟超) was among the first and perhaps most influential of all the writers in the reform movement—more so than his famous teacher Kang Youwei (康有為)—to apply the concept in this way, especially in his discussions about China’s predicaments as a nation and the Chinese as one people. As discussed in the previous section, applying the term *weiji* to politics, society, and military affairs was not new in the history of its use. But applying the term to describe the existential condition of the Chinese as a *people* and the Chinese polity as a *nation-state* vis-à-vis others in the world was unprecedented.

Conceptually, what was happening in China as a result of the late Qing reform movement was that there was a fundamental shift from the dynastic to nationalistic pattern of thinking. The shift first occurred among the reform-minded elite and then became more widespread among the general public through the proliferation of newspapers and magazines associated with the reform and revolutionary movements.¹⁷ Liang Qichao’s own magazines (all of which were included in the DSCIH) were the most powerful of all literary forces shaping opinion in China from 1898 to 1911.¹⁸ In the eyes of these writers, the *weiji* of China was no longer the *weiji* of the royal ruling family, but the *weiji* of the entire Chinese people. To be sure, the so-called *minzu weiji* (national crisis) was not the only *weiji* that reform and revolutionary writers were concerned about. It was, however, a key component of the development in public discourse of early 20th-century China. This development was manifested in the increasing

¹⁷ Britton, Roswell S., *The Chinese Periodical Press 1800-1912* (Taipei: Ch’engwen Publishing Company, 1966), I-85.

¹⁸ Britton, 1966, 86-110.

trend to apply the conceptual lens of *weiji* in examining current affairs. Indeed the majority of the sources from the period 1895-1928 reviewed in the study came from sections of reform and revolutionary periodicals in which events and situations in China and the world at large were reported and discussed using the concept of *weiji*.

For such a conceptual shift to take place, I argue that there must have been transformations occurring on the level of cultural conception of history as part of its cultural preconditions. As an ideology, nationalism had to take root within the shared background of cultural meaning to become conceptually possible and operative. The shift away from the dynastic mode of thought could not have taken place without in some way changing the cultural presuppositions and convictions under which it had always made sense. Thus the growing momentum of nationalist thinking across various segments of the late imperial society was indication that fundamental changes had occurred in the cultural background itself. It follows that conditions that made possible the rise of nationalism in early 20th-century China had to be found in the dynamic relationship between the emerging nationalistic pattern of thinking and the cultural background at large.

The change in cultural preconditions was such that justification for reform and nation-building cast in the language of historical evolution was able to receive plausibility. Kang Youwei's famous *Da tong shu* 大同書 is a case in point. While his argument for reform was made under a basically Confucian framework, his reform ideology rested upon a conception of history as a unilinear development through determinate stages toward an ideal future. It should be noted that Kang apparently derived this linear conception of history mainly from his reading of Western thought.¹⁹

¹⁹ Chang, Hao, "Intellectual change and the reform movement, 1890-8," in *The Cambridge History of China*, ed., John K. Fairbank and Kwang-Ching Liu.

His argument for reform would not have been intelligible or persuasive to others unless it was formulated under a shared cultural conceptual framework that was receptive to the notion that history was linear and manmade. The widespread support gained by his reform ideology suggests that the linear conception of history original to the modern West had already to some extent taken hold in the cultural background of late 19th-century China, and at the same time, further reinforced its acceptance.

It was with the recognition, whether spoken or unspoken, that history was a linear process in which change was manmade that a sense of urgency to reform existing institutions and to mobilize the Chinese people into revolutionary struggles to overcome the national crisis could be generated and translated into action. From this perspective, applying the concept of *weiji* to national and international affairs made sense, because the conceptual framework within which it operated had already made sense. This is to say, underlying the modern transformations in the use of *weiji* was the emerging ideology of nationalism, which was in turn buttressed by a conception of history as a linear and manmade process. Because this conception of history may be traced to the emergence of Western modernity, its diffusion in modern Chinese culture would signify the convergence of not only the histories of “*weiji*” in China and “crisis” in the West but also important features of their underlying cultural preconditions.

The trend observed might be a reflection as well as consequence of larger cultural transformations underlying the emergence of modernity in China. Certainly, no sweeping statement could be made about the cause and nature of cultural changes that occurred across all segments of Chinese society in the 20th century. But some profound changes in the conception

of how the world works through historical time must have taken place in Chinese culture beginning with the period identified here, such that the inclination to see the world through the lens of *weiji* came to make perfect sense to those who used it. We see the first traces of such a change in writings by individuals such as Kang, Liang, and their contemporaries, for whom Western ideas and modes of thinking undoubtedly had transformative impacts.

It is possible that modern transformations in the use of *weiji* took place as a result of the conscious or unconscious adoption in China of the conceptual frameworks and philosophies of history original to the modern West. If this was true, then the process by which “*weiji*” became the Chinese word for “crisis” would be inextricably linked to deeper changes in the Chinese self-identity and outlook on the world in the 20th century. Those changes were, however, soon to surface in cultural conceptions of history that could be said to have provided fertile ground for the subsequent takeoff in China of the quintessentially “Western” Enlightenment idea of applying reason to change the world in forms of ideology ranging from communism to scientism.

These transformations were made possible, both literally and figuratively, by the translation of Western modernity. In that sense, the conceptual histories of “*weiji*” and “crisis” could be said to have converged in the 20th century on the basis of a deeper convergence on the level of cultural preconditions.

5.4 Contemporary Uses of Weiji

By and large, *weiji*'s contemporary usage does not go beyond the conventions established in the first three decades of 20th century. The

perceptive (M1), situational (M5), eventual (M6), and temporal (M7) modes of application remain the predominant semantic types. Meanwhile, there was a great deal of variation in its context of application in the 20th century due perhaps to the continually shifting ideological landscape. During the Mao years, for example, *weiji* was used almost exclusively in discussions about foreign crises and, in particular, crises of capitalism. So much literature was generated on *ziben zhuyi weiji* 資本主義危機 (crisis of capitalism) that one contemporary dictionary notes (falsely) that the term was originally only applicable to capitalist societies.²⁰

Beginning in the late 80s, the lens of *weiji* was refocused to capture not only foreign (Western) predicaments but also issues of domestic concern. At the same time, the term became a popular catchword, applied to virtually all sorts of life situations. Talks about *xinren weiji* 信任危機 (crisis of trust), *daode weiji* 道德危機 (crisis of morality), *geren weiji* 個人危機 (crisis of the individual) proliferated in the press. This is not to mention the highly prominent place of *jingji weiji* 經濟危機 (economic crisis) and *jinrong weiji* 金融危機 (financial crisis) in news coverage and public discussion. Academic discourse in history, literature, philosophy, sociology, and psychology, etc. likely embraced the language of *weiji* (e.g. *shixue weiji* 史學危機, the crisis of historiography). Amid the pervasive *weiji*-talk in the last thirty years, there has been growing interest across all social sectors, especially in government and corporate entities, in the expanding literature on *weiji guanli* 危機管理 (crisis management).

In terms of cultural meaning, today's popular interpretation of the Chinese National Anthem, the "March of the Volunteers," is perhaps the most representative of contemporary understandings of *weiji*. Originally

²⁰ 當代中國流行語辭典 *Dictionary of Contemporary Popular Terms* (CJKV-English Dictionary Database)

written during the anti-Japanese war in 1932, the song was adopted as the official national anthem in 1949. Mao allegedly favored the song's lyrics—

Arise,
Ye who refuse to be slaves!
With our very flesh and blood,
Let us build our new Great Wall!
The peoples of China are in the most critical time,
Everybody must roar his defiance.
Arise!
Arise!
Arise!
Millions of hearts with one mind,
Brave the enemy's gunfire, March on!
Brave the enemy's gunfire, March on!
March on!
March on!
On!

—for its ability to capture the deep sense of crisis most characteristic of the period of its origin. He believed that it was crucial for the Chinese people to remember their country's historical struggles and forever carry the sense of crisis that made possible its revolutionary success.

Over time, this sense of crisis Mao so valued became linked to notions of *youhuan yishi* 憂患意識 (worry consciousness) and *ju an si wei* 居安思危 (thinking about danger in times of peace; or, eternal vigilance)—ideas both thought to underlie and crystallize in the concept of *weiji*. The new phrase *weiji gan* 危機感 (sense of crisis) gained widespread currency as

it came to signify a highly prized state of mind. From state propaganda to cultural critique, from business talk to academic discourse, from social analysis to individual reflection, the value in precaution against risk and danger is everywhere embraced and emphasized. Possessing a constant sense of crisis is considered the crucial ingredient for success and progress in any given course of action.

Parallel to this overwhelmingly positive interpretation of *weiji* is an equally popular formulation of its relation to historical progress. The view defines human history as a continuous process of confronting and overcoming *weiji*. Crises are considered an inherent category of human experience and fundamental cause for change and historical progress. Great efforts are made to fully capitalize the linguistic coincidence that *weiji* is a compound of *wei* and *ji* to emphasize the human dimension in crisis control, hence giving rise to the magic formula “crisis = danger + opportunity.” The enduring popularity of this interpretation attests to the now deep rootedness of its underlying conception of history, which as we have seen first began to take hold in Chinese culture in the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries.

Conclusion

In tracing the historical career of *weiji*, I have examined the origins of its contemporary cultural status on three levels of culture. The first was the semantics of the idea in terms of its definitional meaning and conventional usage. The second was how the concept was pressed into service by and gained meaning under ideologies or systems of thought in the modern period. On the third level, I located the condition of possibility of the concept’s present cultural status in the transformations of the lifeworld in

the emergence of Chinese modernity, which shared important features with the emergence of Western modernity as described by Reinhart Koselleck.

If my findings are accurate, they will serve as evidence that Koselleck's thesis can be applied to modern China. At the same time, my analysis will provide a possible source of explanation for why this is the case and inform theoretical as well as empirical inquiries into the emergence of Chinese modernity. It also joins Koselleck's analysis to form a basis for future investigations on the idea of crisis in other modern cultures around the world.

For Koselleck, "crisis" is a "structural signature of modernity" because it encapsulates a particular conception of history, the clearest articulations of which can be found in writings of thinkers such as Emmanuel Kant and Karl Marx. Rather than an explicit "philosophy of history" though, this conception dwells in the cultural background and is embodied in social action and discourse. Since its earliest appearance in 17th-18th-century Europe, it has become part of the cultural preconditions, or shared convictions and taken-for-granted knowledge of the world, up to our time.

Uncertainty is the defining feature and perhaps inevitable consequence of this conception of history as linear and man-made. Because of the implicit mentality that history moves as if we are thrown into an open future with virtually no guidance from God, nature, or our own past experience, we are especially prone to recognize uncertainties as we go about our lives. We seek to manage our uncertainties through the means of *reason*, institutionalized in our science, economy, and politics. We want to plan what can happen to us. What else in the end explains our obsession with risk and crisis management—with turning "crisis" into "opportunity?"

If we agree with this assessment, then the implication of my analysis

of *weiji* is that this uniquely modern conception of history was part of the cultural preconditions for the emergence of modernity in China as it was for modernity in Western Europe. It would be on the basis of the convergence of this basic mentality regarding history in Chinese and Western cultures that the conceptual histories of *weiji* and “crisis” could be said to have converged in the modern period. In this sense, *weiji* would indeed be considered the cultural counterpart of “crisis” in relation to “modernity.”

Moreover, my analysis suggests that many of the earth-shattering and seemingly unrelated, or even contradictory, events of 20th-century Chinese history (e.g. late-Qing Republican revolutionary movements, Marxist-Leninist Communist revolutions, the Cultural Revolution, market reform beginning in 1978, and the rapidly expanding role of science and technology) and the dramatic ongoing social, economic, political, and environmental transformations in contemporary China all presuppose the same changes in cultural preconditions. The diversity of ways in which the idea of history as a human artifact amenable to reason has been branded into ideologies (e.g. nationalism, communism, industrialism, capitalism, scientism, etc.) and put into action testifies to the depth and tenacity with which it has taken hold in the Chinese collective consciousness. As with “crisis” in European contexts, we therefore can go a long way towards understanding the sources, nature and consequences of Chinese modernity through the lens of “*weiji*.”

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