Among the keywords widely circulated and used in modern China, *geming* 革命 as the translation of “revolution” was perhaps one of the most heroic, charismatic, and fateful. In 1902 the word captivated the public ethos to such an extent that Liang Qichao stated with alarm: “A few years ago, most people were terrified to hear the word *minquan* 民权 (civil rights). But when the word *geming* began to circulate, they no longer felt that way about *minquan* but feared *geming*.” In the next year, with the publication of Zou Rong’s 邹容 pamphlet *The Revolutionary Army* (*Geming jun* 革命军), a nationwide anti-Qing sentiment was aroused, as Qian Jibo 钱基博, a notable literary historian, described: “At the time everybody talked about *geming*!” Liang and Qian not only recorded that *geming* ideology had gained a foothold at the turn of twentieth-century China but also revealed in their hyperbolic tone that they were themselves under the spell of the word. Indeed, *geming* discourse sustained its magic power in China until the 1980s. Tired of “class struggle” politics in the post-Mao age, people were willing to get rid of the word, as epitomized by Liu Zaifu’s 刘再复 declaration: “Farewell to revolution!”

Modern China was often characterized by “revolution,” best exemplified by John Fairbank’s book *The Great Chinese Revolution, 1800–1985* (1986), in which the term is largely used as a metaphor for economic, social, and cultural transformation in modern China. But what of the word *geming*? What were its uses, meanings, and functions? As a linguistic component of the “great Chinese revolution,” the word had its own stories to tell. Like a red thread through the formation of ideology in twentieth-century China, *geming* carried with it discursive practices in variant forms across political, literary, and cultural realms in different periods, intertwined with a symbol of political legitimacy, the cry of national crisis, the spectacle of mass movements, rituals of totem and taboo, and a canon of literature and art. In short, without this keyword the Chinese Revolution might be boneless and soulless.
This paper will focus on several critical intersections in the historical trajectory of *geming*, emphasizing the connection between politics and literature. I will describe how the discourses of *geming* came to the fore at the turn of the twentieth century by being translated into the syntax of world revolution, how *geming* was called forth time and again when the nation needed new spiritual drive in its search for subjectivity in the modern era, and how the literary arena was shaped by that term in different periods.

The Translation of Geming at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

The discourse of *geming*, or revolution, originated from dynastic crises in ancient China. The *Yijing* 易经, or *Book of Changes*, one of the most authoritative Confucian classics, includes one of the earliest uses of the term: “Heaven and earth undergo their changes, and the four seasons complete their functions. Tang and Wu made revolutions in accordance with the will of Heaven, and in response to the wishes of people. Great indeed is what takes place in the time of change.”¹ In the sixteenth century B.C., King Tang 汤 established the Shang dynasty after a military overthrow of the Xia dynasty, and in the eleventh century B.C., the same story was repeated when King Wu 武 founded the Zhou dynasty after defeating the Shang. The word *geming* in the *Yijing* was given a sacred aura, yet this Confucian legitimation of the Tang and Wu rebellions in the name of heaven and the people, despite contradicting Confucian ethical principles, implied a critique of as well as a threat to imperial power. Because of the word’s ambiguity, the discourse of *geming* was almost treated as taboo in historical writings and usually hidden between the lines. As an important part of traditional political culture, it was implied by the parallel word *panluan* (armed rebellion 叛乱) or *zaofan* (revolt 造反) in describing numerous suppressed peasant revolts.

In the late nineteenth century *geming* was awakened in the context of world revolution by way of Japanese translation. The Confucian *geming* discourse had been introduced in Japan in the eighth century and unquestioningly received as official ideology until the seventeenth century, when the Tokugawa royalists condemned Tang and Wu as dynastic traitors and claimed that revolution could only be endorsed