

**A Diachronic Study of the Chinese Word “革命” [ge ming]
(Revolution): A Corpus-Based Analysis**

基于语料库的中文词“革命”的历时语义研究

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Abstract

The Chinese word “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) has undergone a significant semantic change over time. In early Chinese thought, it referred to the replacement of a ruler under Heaven’s mandate; in the modern era, it came to describe radical social and political transformation. In recent decades, the word has been further broadened, appearing in contexts such as “technological revolution” or “self-revolution.” This article traces the historical evolution of “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) and examines the social and cultural factors that influenced these shifts. Drawing on examples from historical texts, newspapers, and contemporary online sources, and using corpus-based analysis tools (PMI and TF-IDF), this study identifies major turning points in the word’s uses. The findings show that “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) gradually shifted from a divinely sanctioned action to a term representing human-driven change, reflecting the dynamic relationship between language and society.

Keywords: revolution; semantic change; diachronic study; Chinese; corpus-based analysis

摘 要

中文词“革命” [ge ming] (revolution) 随着时间的推移, 经历了显著的语义演变。在早期中国思想中, 它指代天命更替下的统治者更迭; 进入近现代, 它转而描述激进的社会和政治变革。近几十年来, 该词的语义进一步泛化, 出现在“科技革命”或“自我革命”等语境中。本文旨在追溯“革命”一词的历史演变, 并考察影响这些转变的社会文化因素。本研究利用历史文献、报纸以及现代在线资源, 并借助语料库语言学分析工具, 识别了该词在不同时期使用上的主要转折点。通过 PMI 和 TF-IDF 得到的分析结果表明, “革命”一词的语义逐渐从一个神学、天命概念, 演变为一个世俗化、人本主义的政治行动, 并在近代以来进一步转化为一种精神遗产和价值符号, 清晰地反映了语言与社会的动态关系。

关键词: 革命; 语义演变; 历时研究; 中文; 语料库

1. Introduction

Language is a mirror of society and culture; as its fundamental units, the semantic change of words faithfully records the evolution of social thought (Traugott & Dasher 2001). In the Chinese context, “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) is undoubtedly one of the most influential and dynamic terms in modern history. Its earliest attestation appears in the I Ching (Book of Changes), which includes the following passage:

(1) 汤武革命，顺乎天而应乎人

[tang wu ge ming, shun hu tian er ying hu ren]

(The revolutions of Tang and Wu were in accordance with Heaven and in response to the people.)

This referred to the dynastic changes led by King Tang and King Wu. However, when we use this word today, we may be referring to the “辛亥革命” [xin hai ge ming] (Xinhai Revolution, a political event), the “文化大革命” [wen hua da ge ming] (Cultural Revolution, a social movement), a “科技革命” [ke ji ge ming] (technological revolution), or even a “自我革命” [zi wo ge ming] (self-revolution, understood as self-reform and disciplined self-critique).

How did this vast semantic scope develop? This paper aims to analyze the semantic evolution of the word “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) across different historical periods, exploring its diachronic path from the ancient concept of “dynastic change” to the modern “socio-political transformation,” and further to its contemporary senses of “technological revolution” and “spiritual legacy.”

To advance this inquiry, this study seeks to answer a series of interconnected research questions. First, what distinct semantic stages has the word “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) undergone from antiquity to the modern era? Second, how do quantitative metrics—such as word frequency and collocational strength—capture this semantic evolution? Finally, what role did historical, social, and political contexts play in driving these semantic shifts? By investigating these questions, this article aims not only to clarify the evolutionary history of this key term but also to situate that evolution within broader intellectual and social developments in modern China.

2. Literature Review

This research is situated at the intersection of two primary academic fields: diachronic Semantics and Corpus Linguistics.

Diachronic Semantics focuses on the change in word meanings over time. Early research often relied on philological and etymological analysis (see, e.g., Ullmann 1962). With the rise of cognitive linguistics, scholars began to focus on the cognitive mechanisms underlying semantic change, such as metaphor, metonymy, and (inter)subjectification (Heine, Claudi, &

Hünemeyer 1991; Traugott 2003). In the Chinese context, scholars have conducted detailed philological studies on the evolution of key items in the Chinese lexicon, particularly in discussions of the origins and adoption of modern political neologisms such as “民主” [min zhu] (democracy), “科学” [ke xue] (science), and “干部” [gan bu] (cadre) (Wang 1980; Feng 2004).

Corpus Linguistics has provided an increasingly important empirical methodology for diachronic research. By conducting quantitative analysis of large-scale diachronic corpora, researchers can objectively track changes in word frequency, collocation, and semantic prosody (McEnery & Hardie 2012). For example, analyzing the collocates of a term can reveal how its semantic field has expanded or specialized over time.

The integration of Diachronic Semantics and Corpus Linguistics, known as corpus-based diachronic semantics, has become a mainstream paradigm. Scholars have employed historical corpora (e.g., COHA) to trace the semantic evolution of numerous English words. In China, following the development of large-scale corpora such as the BCC (Xun 2016) and the CCL, quantitative diachronic studies on Chinese words, including “和谐” [he xie] (harmony) and “同志” [tong zhi] (comrade), have become increasingly common (Sun 2006; Liang 2010).

Although scholars have analyzed the modern usage of “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) from historical and sociological perspectives (e.g., Jin & Liu 2009), gap remains in the literature. Few studies have simultaneously covered the word’s entire timespan from antiquity (Pre-Qin to Qing dynasties) to the modern era (1900-2015) employing a data-driven, mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative PMI/TF-IDF analysis with qualitative interpretation to systematically trace its semantic trajectory over time. This study aims to address this gap.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a framework that integrates Corpus Linguistics (McEnery & Hardie 2012) with the principles of Diachronic Semantics. While Corpus Linguistics provides the empirical methodology (PMI, TF-IDF) to observe linguistic change, Diachronic Semantics provides the theoretical toolkit to classify and explain how and why these changes occur.

Specifically, this paper will utilize the established typology of semantic change mechanisms, primarily as discussed by Ullmann (1962) and Traugott (2001). The key mechanisms relevant to the evolution of “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) are:

Generalization: The process by which a word’s meaning expands to encompass a wider range of referents.

Specialization: The process by which a word’s meaning becomes more restricted and specific.

Metaphorical Extension: The process by which a word from a concrete source domain (e.g., political overthrow) is extended to describe an abstract target domain (e.g., technological change).

Amelioration / Pejoration: The process by which a word acquires a more positive (amelioration) or negative (pejoration) connotation, often referred to as a shift in "semantic prosody" (Firth 1957).

Subjectification: A specific type of change where the meaning shifts from describing an objective, external-world event to encoding the speaker's internal, subjective state or evaluation (Traugott 2003).

This framework will be applied in Section 5, moving beyond a simple description of what changed to an explanation of the linguistic pathways of that change.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative corpus analysis with qualitative historical interpretation. All corpus construction scripts, data processing pipelines, and additional materials are publicly available in the corresponding GitHub repository: <https://github.com/HelloSirEric/course-paper-text-classification>.

4.1. Corpus Collection and Processing

The corpus was constructed in two parts:

- **Ancient Corpus (Pre-Qin –Qing):** Due to the low frequency and specialized use of “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) in ancient texts, this sub-corpus was compiled by retrieving over 800 entries from the Chinese Text Project (CTP) and the classical section of the BCC (BLCU Corpus Center), covering major canonical works.
- **Modern Corpus (1900s –2015):** Derived from the modern section of the BCC, this sub-corpus initially contained 210,000 sentences with “革命” [ge ming] (revolution). A stratified sample of 10,800 sentences was extracted, preserving decade-level distribution.

All entries were processed through a standardized pipeline: texts were tokenized using a large-model API with manual checks for historical accuracy; stopwords and punctuation were removed via a custom stopword list ('stopwords_cn.txt'), generating a 'tokens_no_stop' column; finally, corpora were grouped by historical period (ancient corpus by dynasty, modern corpus by decade).

4.2. Quantitative Analysis Models

Building on the theoretical principles outlined above, TF-IDF and PMI analyses were operationalized as follows:

1. **TF-IDF (Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency):** Each historical period (e.g., "Ming Dynasty" or "1920s") was treated as a single document. TF-IDF identifies terms

that are frequent in a specific period but relatively rare in others, highlighting key topics associated with “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) .

$$TF-IDF(w, d) = TF(w, d) \cdot \ln \frac{N}{DF(w)}$$

Top 30 high-TF-IDF terms were extracted for each period.

2. **PMI (Pointwise Mutual Information):** Measures the strength of association between “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) and co-occurring words at the sentence level. A high PMI indicates a strong semantic bond.

$$PMI(w, target) = \log_2 \frac{P(w, target)}{P(w)P(target)}$$

Minimum co-occurrence thresholds were set (Ancient ≥ 2 , Modern ≥ 5) to ensure statistical reliability.

By tracking changes in high-PMI collocates and high-TF-IDF keywords across historical periods, we can systematically trace semantic drift and interpret these patterns in light of historical and socio-political contexts.

4.3. Visualization

Quantitative results were visually represented using Matplotlib and WordCloud libraries. PMI bar charts display top collocates, TF-IDF heatmaps show keyword trends over time, and word clouds illustrate semantic hotspots for each historical period.

5. Analysis and Discussion

This section represents the main analytical focus of this study, by integrating quantitative findings from TF-IDF and PMI analyses with qualitative historical interpretation in order to address the research questions posed.

5.1. Ancient Period (Pre-Qin—Qing): Theological and Ritualistic Legitimacy

Data Source: 'tfidf_results.xlsx - [Dynasty].csv', 'ancient_out_PMI_full.xlsx - Sheet1.csv'

The analysis of TF-IDF data (from `tfidf_results.xlsx`) across the eight dynasties indicates that the semantic field of “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) in antiquity was highly stable and elite-oriented. In the Pre-Qin data (from `xian_qin.csv`), high-weight keywords include “汤武” [tang wu] (Tang Wu, King Tang and King Wu); “受命” [shou ming] (receiving the Mandate); “改正朔” [gai zheng shuo] (correcting the first day of the new year); “易服色” [yi fu se] (changing the color of court vestments); “天” [tian] (Heaven); and “民” [min] (the

people). This semantic core remains largely consistent in subsequent dynasties, with “汤武” [tang wu] (Tang Wu) continuing to appear as a high-weight term in the Song and Ming periods. These data confirm that the baseline meaning of “革命” [ge ming] was not a general term for change, but a highly specific, ritualistic, and theological concept tied to the “Mandate of Heaven” [tian ming]

Sentence-level PMI analysis (from `ancient_out_PMI_full.csv`) indicates that the words most closely associated with “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) include “王者” [wang zhe] (the king; royalty), “礼” [li] (rites; ritual), “志” [zhi] (records; annals), “君” [jun] (the ruler), and “改正” [gai zheng] (to correct).

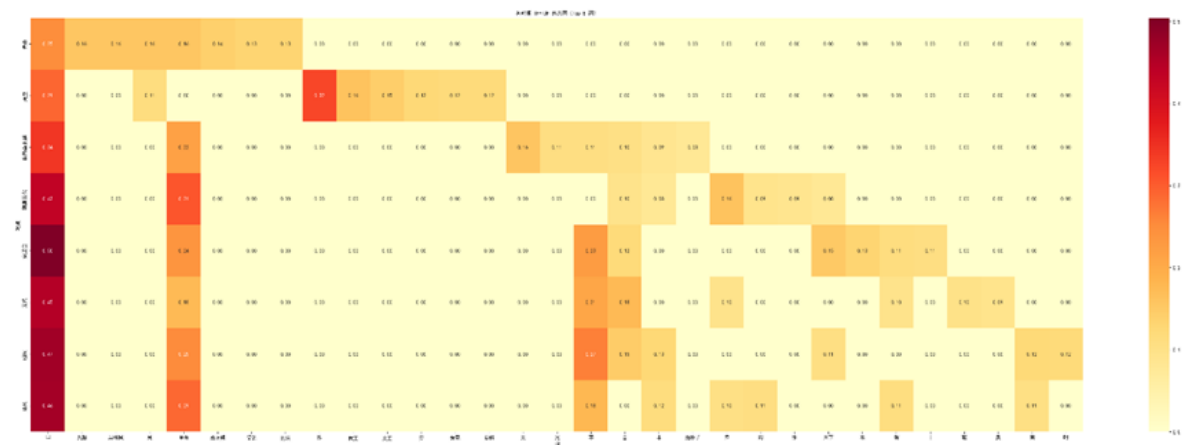


Figure 1: Heatmap of High-Frequency Collocates in the Ancient Corpus

These data robustly confirm the core meaning of “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) in antiquity: a top-down political-theological concept concerned with legitimacy (Orthodoxy). The TF-IDF keywords “汤武” [tang wu] (King Tang and King Wu) and “受命” [shou ming] (receiving the Mandate) clearly point to historical exemplars of dynastic change, framing the act as one of “according with the Mandate of Heaven,” rather than a popular uprising. The presence of “改正朔” [gai zheng shuo] (correcting the first day of the new year) and “易服色” [yi fu se] (changing the color of court vestments) reveals a strong ritualistic character; these were prescribed rites for a new king to perform, signaling that the Mandate had been transferred.

Furthermore, the high-PMI collocates “王者” [wang zhe] (the king; royalty), “君” [jun] (the ruler), “礼” [li] (rites; ritual), and “志” [zhi] (records; annals) demonstrate that discourse surrounding “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) was exclusively elitist, confined to discussions among rulers, historians, and scholars within the context of court annals (“志” [zhi]) and state rites (“礼” [li]).

In summary, the ancient concept of “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) was sacred, elite-oriented, and ritualistic. It signified a dynastic change in which the ruler “王者” [wang zhe] (king) acted in accordance with “天命” [tian ming] (Heaven’s Mandate) to “革” [ge] (change) the old “命” [ming] (mandate).

5.2. Early Modern Period (1900s–1920s): Parties, Republics, and Society

Data sources: modern_tfidf.xlsx (1900.csv, 1910.csv, 1920.csv); modern_out_PMI_by_period.xlsx (1911–1926.csv)

In the mid-19th century, during Japan’s Meiji period, enlightenment thinkers such as Fukuzawa Yukichi and Nakae Chōmin, when translating the Western concept of “revolution,” borrowed the Chinese classical term “革命”[ge ming] (Japanese: *kakumei*). They removed the theological connotations of the “Mandate of Heaven” (“天命”[tian ming]) and endowed it with a purely modern political meaning, using it to describe the radical actions of the people overthrowing the old order and establishing a new system. This transformed concept of “革命”[ge ming] (revolution) was re-introduced to China in the 1870s–1890s through newspapers such as *Shenbao* (“申报”[shen bao]) and Chinese residents in Japan, including Huang Zunxian (“黄遵宪”[huang zun xian]).

The earliest modern usages can be seen in late 1870s reports in *Shenbao* and other newspapers covering the Japanese Meiji Restoration or Western events (e.g., “戊辰革命”[wu chen ge ming] (the “Boshin Revolution”), referring to the 1868 restoration of imperial rule). Huang Zunxian’s *Records of Japan* (“日本国志”[ri ben guo zhi], completed in 1887) systematically employed the modern sense of “革命”[ge ming] (revolution) to describe the Meiji Restoration, marking the formal acceptance of the term in the Chinese-speaking world. After China’s defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, a large number of Chinese students went to Japan, further accelerating the spread of this semantic shift. Reformist and revolutionary intellectuals such as Liang Qichao (“梁启超”[liang qi chao]), Zhang Taiyan (“章太炎”[zhang tai yan]), and Sun Yat-sen (“孙中山”[sun zhong shan]) were deeply influenced; Sun Yat-sen even formally adopted the name “革命党”[ge ming dang] (revolutionary party) for his faction in the early 1900s, whereas previously terms such as “起义”[qi yi] (uprising) or “光复”[guang fu] (restoration) were more commonly used.

According to diachronic searches in the BCC corpus, the frequency trend of “革命”[ge ming] (revolution) since the 20th century is as follows:

检索式“革命”的频率图

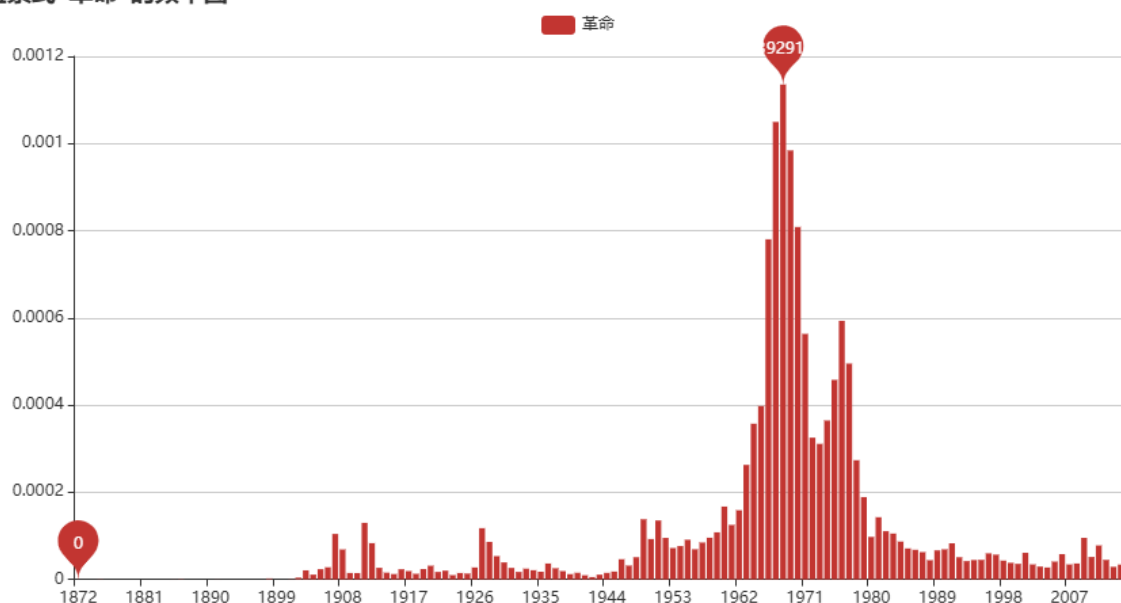


Figure 2: The Frequency Trend of “革命”
[ge ming] (revolution) Since the 20th Century

Entering the 20th century, the semantic field of “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) experienced a radical transformation. Quantitative analysis of the TF-IDF data demonstrates this shift, highlighting the emergence of new political, social, and party-related contexts associated with the term.

- In the 1900.csv file (1900s), the central keyword becomes “革命党”[ge ming dang] (revolutionary party), appearing alongside “立宪”[li xian] (constitutionalism), “留学生”[liu xue sheng] (overseas student), and the pejorative counter-term “匪乱”[fei luan] (bandit rebellion).
- In the 1910.csv file (1910s), following the Xinhai Revolution, the keywords shift to “革命军”[ge ming jun] (revolutionary army), “共和”[gong he] (republic), and “民国”[min guo] (republic).
- By the 1920.csv file (1920s), the semantics evolve further, dominated by terms like “总理”[zong li] (Premier, referring to Sun Yat-sen), “民众”[min zhong] (the masses), “国民革命”[guo min ge ming] (National Revolution), “军阀”[jun fa] (warlord), “本党”[ben dang] (our party, referring to the KMT), and “三民主义”[san min zhu yi] (Three Principles of the People).

The PMI data for this period (1911–1926.csv) reveals new, strong collocations, such as “社会”[she hui] (society), “俄国”[e guo] (Russia), “国会”[guo hui] (parliament), and “宪法”[xian fa] (constitution).

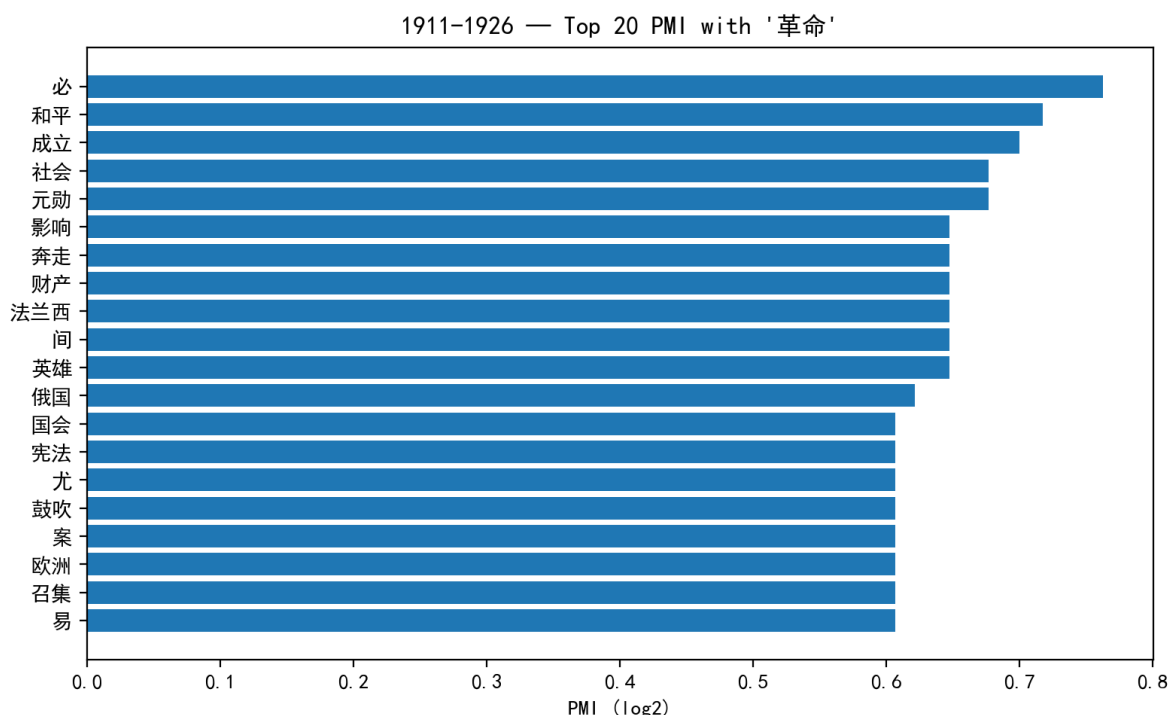


Figure 3: Top 20 PMI with ”革命”

Quantitative data demonstrate the semantic shift of “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) from theological concepts to secular political contexts, paralleling developments in modern Chinese history (Jin & Liu 2009). The ancient terms “天命”[tian ming] (Heaven’s Mandate) and “王者”[wang zhe] (the king) disappear completely. The semantic core transitions from “Heaven” to modern political entities, including “革命党”[ge ming dang] (revolutionary party) and “本党”[ben dang] (our party). Its goal evolves from dynastic change to the establishment of new political systems: “共和”[gong he] (republic), “民国”[min guo] (republic), and “国会”[guo hui] (parliament).

Notably, the agent of the revolution expands from the singular “king” to “留学生”[liu xue sheng] (overseas students), “革命军”[ge ming jun] (revolutionary army), and, for the first time, “民众”[min zhong] (the masses). High-PMI collocates such as “俄国”[e guo] (Russia) and “社会”[she hui] (society) provide crucial evidence for the introduction of the concept of social revolution and ideas derived from the Russian Revolution (Feng 2004), which profoundly reshaped the meaning of the term.

In this period, “革命”[ge ming] (revolution) becomes a political and military action, led by a modern “党” [dang] (party), based on the “民众”[min zhong] (the masses), guided by a modern ideology (“三民主义”[san min zhu yi] (Three Principles of the People)), and aimed at establishing a “共和”[gong he] (republic)).

Linguistically, this stage represents a clear case of Generalization (or Broadening). The word’s meaning expanded dramatically. It was “liberated” from its ancient, highly specific referent (the single “汤武 [tang wu] event) and broadened to encompass any act of modern po-

litical or social overthrow. The co-occurrence with “社会 [she hui] (society) and “共和 [gong he] (republic) shows it was no longer a divine act but a secular, human-driven one. Furthermore, the co-occurrence with antagonistic terms like “匪乱” [fei luan] (bandit rebellion) in the 1900s data suggests a period of semantic contestation and Pejoration (negative connotation) by opposing groups, before it was later fully Ameliorated (made positive) by the revolutionaries themselves.



Figure 4: Word Cloud of 1920s

5.3. Modern Period I (1940s–1970s): The People, Struggle, and the Leader

Data sources: modern_tfidf.xlsx (1940.csv to 1970.csv); modern_out_PMI_by_period.xlsx ([relevant periods].csv)

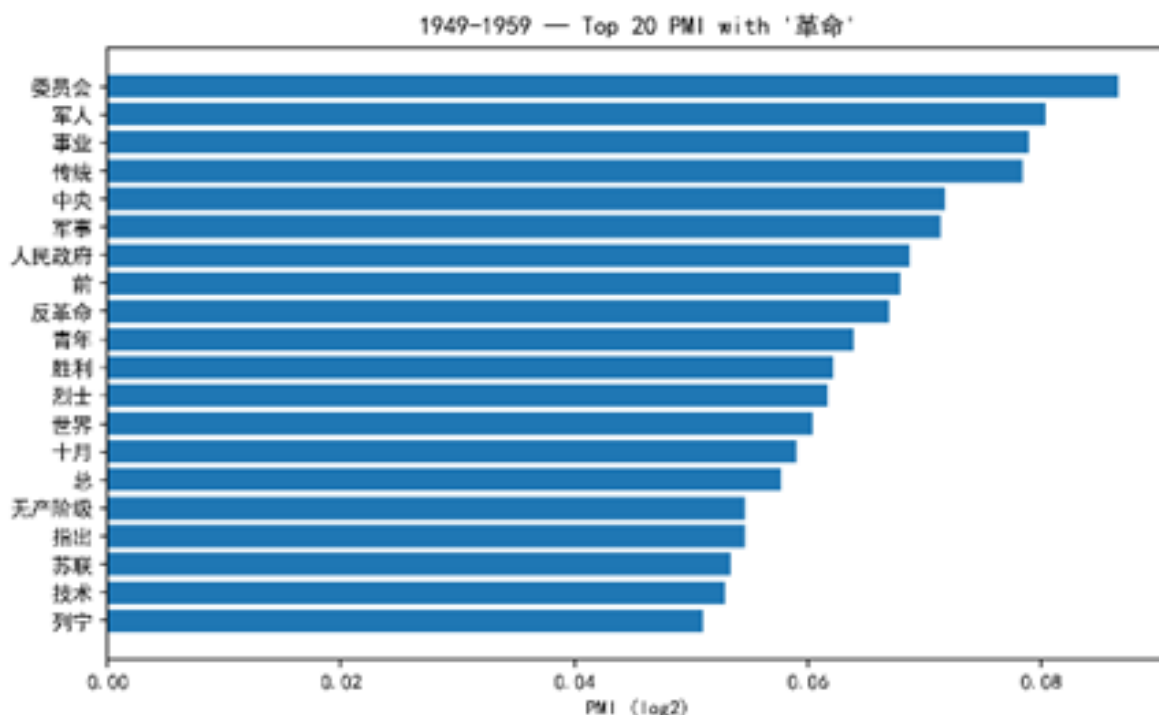


Figure 5: Top 20 PMI with “革命”
[ge ming] (revolution) in 1949-1959

From the 1940s to the 1970s, the meaning of “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) underwent another semantic transformation, reaching its ideological apex. Quantitative analysis demonstrates the increasing centrality of terms related to the people, social struggle, and leadership in both TF-IDF and PMI data.

- In the 1940.csv file, “人民”[ren min] (the People) leaps to become a top-tier keyword for the first time, alongside “共产党”[gong chan dang] (Communist Party), “苏联”[su lian] (Soviet Union), and “帝国主义”[di guo zhu yi] (imperialism).
- In the 1950.csv file, “人民”[ren min] (the People) becomes the absolute core term. “社会主义”[she hui zhu yi] (socialism), “事业”[shi ye] (cause/enterprise), “军人”[jun ren] (soldier), and “斗争”[dou zheng] (struggle) emerge as new high-frequency collocates.
- From the 1960s to the 1970s (1960.csv, 1970.csv), “毛主席”[mao zhu xi] (Chairman Mao) emerges as a central term. The morphological conversion “革命化”[ge ming hua] (to revolutionize, verb) appears. “思想”[si xiang] (thought), “无产阶级”[wu chan jie ji] (proletariat), “毛泽东思想”[mao ze dong si xiang] (Mao Zedong Thought), and “路线”[lu xian] (the political line) come to dominate the semantic field.

Quantitative PMI data from this era (1966-1967.csv) confirms these patterns, with high-PMI scores for “世界”[shi jie] (world), “全世界”[quan shi jie] (the entire world), “帝国主义”

[di guo zhu yi] (imperialism), “领袖”[ling xiu] (Leader), “文化大革命”[wen hua da ge ming] (Cultural Revolution), and “反动派”[fan dong pai] (reactionaries).

This data demonstrates that “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) shifted from a “political event” to a “continuous social state and ideology.” First, from the 1940s, “人民”[ren min] (the People) replaced “民众”[min zhong] (the masses) as the exclusive subject, reflecting the establishment of the CPC narrative. Second, the appearance of the verb “革命化”[ge ming hua] (to revolutionize) is a key linguistic signal: “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) is no longer a completed event, as exemplified by the 1911 Xinhai Revolution, but a continuous process (“斗争”[dou zheng] (struggle)) and a state to be maintained. Finally, “毛主席”[mao zhu xi] (Chairman Mao), “毛泽东思想”[mao ze dong si xiang] (Mao Zedong Thought), and “无产阶级”[wu chan jie ji] (proletariat) become virtual synonyms for “革命” [ge ming] (revolution), imbuing it with intense ideological and global connotations, for example, “全世界”[quan shi jie] (the entire world).

In this period, “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) is represented as a continuous “斗争”[dou zheng] (struggle) and “事业”[shi ye] (cause/enterprise), carried out by “人民”[ren min] (the People) under the guidance of “领袖”[ling xiu] (Leader) and “思想”[si xiang] (Thought), aiming to achieve “社会主义”[she hui zhu yi] (socialism).

This period demonstrates a powerful case of Specialization (or Narrowing). While the word had previously broadened, its meaning now became narrowed and restricted to a very specific political context: the “Maoist, proletarian, continuous class struggle.” A word like “革命化” [ge ming hua] (to revolutionize) shows it was no longer just an event, but a required state of being. This period also marks the peak of its Amelioration. The word acquired an unequivocally positive and obligatory semantic prosody; to be “反革命” [fan ge ming] (anti-revolution) was the most severe political accusation, indicating “revolution” had become a core positive value.

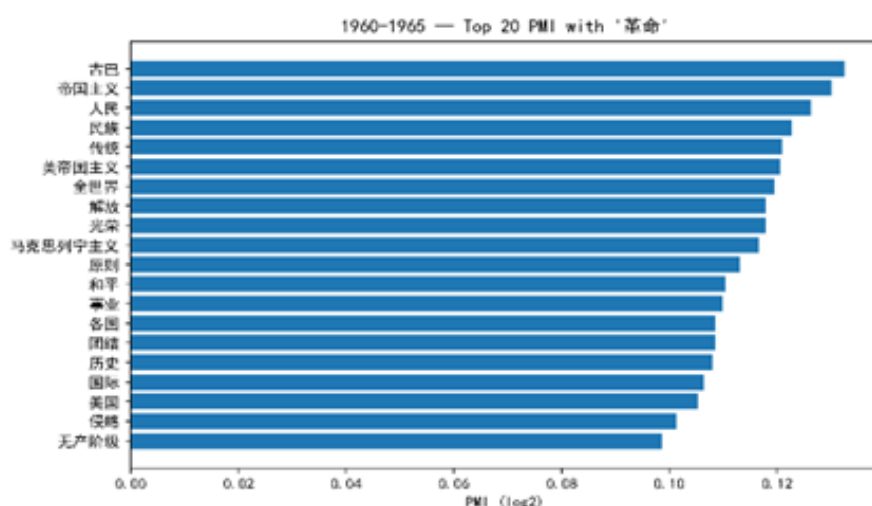


Figure 6: Top 20 PMI with “革命” [ge ming] (revolution) in 1960-1965

5.4. Modern Period II (1980s–2015): Tradition, Construction, and Values

Data sources: modern_tfidf.xlsx (1980.csv to 2010.csv); modern_out_PMI_by_period.xlsx ([relevant periods].csv)

Following the “Reform and Opening Up” policy in 1978, the semantics of “革命”[ge ming] (revolution) underwent significant semantic “de-politicization” and “metaphorization”.

- In the 1980 .csv file, the weights for “斗争”[dou zheng] (struggle) and “领袖”[ling xiu] (Leader) drop rapidly. “传统”[chuan tong] (tradition), “建设”[jian she] (construction), “历史”[li shi] (history), and “教育”[jiao yu] (education) become the new high-frequency keywords.
- In the 1990 .csv file, “现代化”[xian dai hua] (modernization) appears.
- In the 2000s and 2010s (2000 .csv, 2010 .csv), “建设”[jian she] (construction) becomes a core term, and “发展”[fa zhan] (development), “改革”[gai ge] (reform), “核心”[he xin] (core), and “价值观”[jia zhi guan] (values) emerge as dominant.

Quantitative PMI data (2001–2015 .csv) confirms this semantic shift, with high-PMI collocates including “军人”[jun ren] (soldier), “价值观”[jia zhi guan] (values), “改革”[gai ge] (reform), “精神”[jing shen] (spirit), “先烈”[xian lie] (martyrs), and “核心”[he xin] (core).



Figure 7: Word Cloud in 2000s

This marks the latest stage of “革命”[ge ming] (revolution)’s semantic evolution: a shift from “action” to “heritage.” The high frequency of “传统”[chuan tong] (tradition), “精神”[jing shen] (spirit), and “历史”[li shi] (history) indicates that “革命”[ge ming] (revolution) itself has been historicized. People no longer “conduct” a revolution but rather “inherit” the “革命传统”

[ge ming chuantong] (revolutionary tradition) or “革命精神”[ge ming jingshen] (revolutionary spirit). Its primary purpose shifts from “斗争”[dou zheng] (struggle) to serving “建设”[jian she] (construction), “改革”[gai ge] (reform), and “现代化”[xian dai hua] (modernization). The dominance of “价值观”[jia zhi guan] (values) and “核心”[he xin] (core) suggests that the primary function of “革命”[ge ming] (revolution) in contemporary, mainstream (BCC) discourse has become that of an ideological symbol, providing historical legitimacy and emotional weight for the “Core Socialist Values” (Liang 2010).

This final stage showcases the most complex linguistic shifts. First, the dominant political meaning (from 5.3) underwent Neutralization (a form of Pejoration, or “cooling off”), losing its “ideological fire” and becoming historicized, as shown by high-frequency collocations like “传统”[chuan tong] (tradition) and “精神”[jing shen] (spirit).

Second, and most importantly, the word underwent widespread Metaphorical Extension. The source domain of “radical political overthrow” was mapped onto new target domains. Your abstract mentions “技术革命”[ji shu ge ming] (technological revolution)—this is a classic metaphor (Technology-is-War/Politics). The word’s meaning generalized again, but this time via metaphor, to mean “any drastic change.”

Third, the concept of “自我革命”[zi wo ge ming] (self-revolution) (mentioned in your intro/conclusion) is a textbook example of Subjectification (Traugott 2003). The word’s meaning shifted from describing an external, objective societal event to describing an internal, subjective personal process of improvement. This represents a significant cognitive shift in the word’s use.

6. Conclusion

This study has systematically mapped the semantic evolution of the Chinese word “革命”[ge ming] (revolution) by applying TF-IDF and PMI analyses to a diachronic corpus spanning from antiquity to 2015.

The study charted a clear linguistic path for “革命”[ge ming]. It began with a highly specific baseline meaning (theological “Mandate of Heaven” change). It then underwent massive Generalization (Broadening) in the early 20th century to mean any political overthrow. This was followed by a period of ideological Specialization (Narrowing) and Amelioration in the mid-20th century. Finally, in the contemporary era, it has undergone widespread Metaphorical Extension (e.g., “technological revolution”) and Subjectification (e.g., “self-revolution”), shifting from an external political act to an internal, abstract concept. Together, these stages trace a coherent semantic arc that mirrors major intellectual and socio-political shifts in Chinese history.

This trajectory is also clearly evidenced by the shift in its core collocates and keywords: from “汤武”[tang wu] (Tang and Wu, the exemplary kings) and “王者”[wang zhe] (the king) in antiquity, to “革命党”[ge ming dang] (revolutionary party) and “共和”[gong he] (republic) in the early modern era, to “人民”[ren min] (the People) and “毛主席”[mao zhu xi] (Chairman

Mao) in Modern Period I, and finally to “传统”[chuan tong] (tradition) and “价值观”[jia zhi guan] (values) in Modern Period II.

This evolution directly mirrors the major intellectual and social shifts in Chinese history: from a “Mandate of Heaven” worldview, to “Western learning” and “national salvation,” to the construction of a socialist ideology, and finally to the “re-narration” of history in the post-1980s era of economic construction.

This study also has several limitations. First, the BCC corpus used for the modern period is heavily biased toward formal written language, such as news reports and published materials. As a result, the generalized and highly metaphorical uses of “革命”[ge ming] (revolution) in contemporary spoken and online contexts are not fully captured by the TF-IDF and PMI data, which primarily reflect political and historical discourse. This suggests a potential semantic bifurcation in current usage: a formal written meaning functioning as a political symbol, and an online colloquial meaning operating as a generalized metaphor.

Second, although the large-model API used for word segmentation was manually spot-checked, segmentation errors may still occur, especially when processing mixed ancient and modern texts.

Finally, due to constraints of time and scope, this study has not conducted a detailed grammatical-level analysis. For example, in the ancient corpus, the character “曰”[yue] (to say) receives a high PMI score, which may reflect a distinctive semantic role in contexts related to reflection or philosophical discourse.

Future research could employ more specialized web-based corpora to examine in greater depth the metaphorization (Metaphorization) of “革命”[ge ming] (revolution) in non-political domains. More sophisticated computational models, such as diachronic word embeddings, may also be used to dynamically model the word’s drift within semantic space across different historical stages.

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