

Introduction

WINTER SOLSTICE 1914. In the pre-dawn cold of Beijing, President Yuan Shikai left the presidential palace for the Temple of Heaven, where he presided over sacrificial rites to Tian (Heaven) in the name of the nation. As recorded by the American ambassador, Paul Reinsch, Yuan “drove surrounded by personal bodyguards over streets covered with yellow sand and lined threefold with soldiers stationed there the evening before.”¹ (Yellow represented the generative principle of the universe in traditional cosmology and was long associated with the imperial family.) Accompanied by a number of his ministers, high officials, and generals, Yuan was joined at the Temple of Heaven by the ritual experts: “the sacrificial meatbearers, the silk and jade bearers, the cupbearers, and those who chanted invocations.” Yuan changed into his sacrificial robes in a tent set up on the grounds, and washed his hands. He then signed a ceremonial board with prayers to Heaven in red letters. (Tian, or “Heaven,” was both a kind of supreme deity and a way of talking about cosmological processes.) Yuan ascended the altar itself, facing north on the second platform, kneeling and bowing four times. His retinue moved ahead to the first platform with the items of sacrifice. The sacrificial firewood was lit, and then Yuan moved to the first circle, lifted the tray of silk, which was then placed on a table. He returned to the second circle for another round of bowing; then the sacrifice of meat and the reading of prayers followed in the same way. Music, dancing (or posturing), and incense accompanied the ceremonies. Yuan offered several prayers, calling on Tian to accept the sacrifices being offered, to protect the nation, and to renew the world. The president then partook of wine and meat, symbolizing the blessings he received from Tian on behalf of the people. Finally the jade was offered to Tian and all the items burnt.

The president’s decision to carry out sacrifices to Heaven, so redolent of ancient imperial practice, fueled rumors that he was plotting to

found a new dynasty and become emperor. When Yuan did indeed try to found a new dynasty the following year, he insisted that his would be an updated emperorship, a constitutional monarchy, a dynasty suitable for a dynamic nation-state. Yet Yuan's would-be emperorship ended in defeat and ignominy. Given Yuan's undoubted power—his control of the military and political bureaucracies, his stifling of dissent—how was it possible his emperorship was stopped in its tracks? For that matter, how could a leader as savvy (and ruthless) as Yuan have so misread the political situation as to self-destruct? What was wrong with founding a new dynasty anyway? Another way of putting the question: Why was Yuan unable to reverse the Revolution of 1911, for all its manifest failures?

Many answers of varying specificity can be given to these questions. The levers of government at Yuan's disposal were already creaky. Self-avowed republicans were enraged by Yuan's betrayal of the Republic. And even among politically active segments of China's population who had brought themselves to accept Yuan's presidential autocracy, few could tolerate the notion of a new dynasty. Even if Yuan had hollowed out parliamentary and local government institutions, abandoning their shells seemed a big step backward. Besides, the Revolution of 1911 had made instant constituencies like adding hot water to make instant noodles, and political gentlemen guarded their constituencies. Similarly, top military officials personally loyal to Yuan were not pleased to see their relationship unilaterally changed, nor the eventual prospect of Yuan's son becoming emperor. China did still have monarchists, but they identified themselves as loyal to the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). Including some figures of considerable influence in Beijing, they could tolerate the Republic, but if there was going to be a restoration of monarchism, it had to be the Qing house that was restored. Finally, the foreign powers, particularly Japan, opposed Yuan's monarchism and gave aid and comfort to his enemies.

Yet at a deeper level, the answers to these questions really revolve around the fact that the time of monarchy had passed. The opposition to Yuan, though multifarious and far from liberal-minded, shared an understanding that the 1911 Revolution was essentially irreversible. Yuan's sacrifices to Heaven appeared no less exotic to educated Chinese, and even more bizarre, than to the American ambassador. Admittedly, the monarchy's

death is easier to see in retrospect than at the time: this is the historian's advantage. Yuan's was not the last attempt to revive it. And while outright restorationism was rare—though it persisted throughout the century—the complex of ideas we can call “imperial Confucianism” shaped efforts to build new political systems into the twenty-first century.

All the same, something deep in the political culture changed forever in 1911. The bonds that held together the Chinese imperial system had been under strain for several generations, and finally burst apart in a brief but violent explosion. The fall of the Qing dynasty was not the first time a dynasty had been overthrown in China's long imperial history, but it was the first time a republic was established. In going to the Altar of Heaven, Yuan was obviously trying to build up a claim to the throne. The Qing emperors had offered sacrifices to Tian at the Temple of Heaven, one of several sacred precincts in the districts surrounding the capital. But the meanings associated with Heaven had changed—not totally and not overnight—but irreversibly nonetheless. For a number of years the Temple of Heaven had been used by U.S. marines for football games. The marines had been stationed in Beijing since helping to put down the Boxer Uprising at the beginning of the century. Yuan, too, had contributed to the desecration of imperial precincts. In 1913 he had taken the presidential oath at the Hall of Supreme Harmony in the Imperial City. This was the main site where the Qing emperors had held court behind high walls. Now, ordinary citizens bought tickets to enter the Imperial City, climb around the Hall, and gawk at sights once reserved only for court officials and foreign emissaries. This implied something about the end of the emperor-subject relationship that no foreign invaders ever could. By the time of the third anniversary of the Republic, in 1914, Yuan opened a museum to display art and relics collected by the Qing emperors—the predecessor of today's Palace Museums in Beijing and Taipei—which again firmly placed the imperial order in the past.

This book describes some of the ways Chinese political culture changed at the turn of the twentieth century. “Political culture” here refers to the systems, ideologies, and assumptions that shape power. Later chapters define imperial Confucianism more precisely, measure the intellectual dimensions of the constitutionalist movement and the 1911 Revolution, examine attempts to legitimate the new political order, and discuss how republicanism

was imagined. With or without a revolution, the traditional imperial system was doomed. The *system*, not any particular emperor or dynasty, had come to be seen as autocratic and despotic, inherently incapable of responding to the challenges of the day, and opposed by its very nature to the creation of modern citizens. For, it was felt, the imperial forms had to be rooted up if China was to become the rational, dynamic, and civilized nation-state that it needed to become if it were to survive in a dangerous world. This was the view of both those who supported and those who opposed violent revolution. In a sense, the task they set themselves was no less than the creation of China itself out of the moribund empire. Once the revolution had taken place, there was no going back, as Yuan Shikai learned to his cost.

The fires of nationalism and statism in China were set ablaze in the late nineteenth century and continued to burn across the twentieth century and beyond. By “statism,” I mean the view that the state—the institutions of governance—is the ultimate locus of sovereignty, self-legitimizing, and the highest source of good. Statism is compatible with republican institutions but may also justify dictatorial ones. In either case, it focuses on the relationship between the state and the individual citizen, who is defined by “rights and duties.” This was key to the new political discourse that arose during the late Qing. Citizenship was inseparable from national identity, the second great key to late Qing discourse. Nationalism was about creating “Chinese,” as distinct from “men of Qing.” The empire, which was a multinational project, was not compatible with the concept of a “people” who more or less shared common blood and a common culture and who were collectively the subject of history. In this view, what counted in history was not one great dynasty succeeding another but the formation of a Chinese people who could stand equally with the other peoples of the world. No people could stand without a state. And so the logic of nationalism led to statism, and ultimately a view of the sovereign state as the subject of history.

“AFTER EMPIRE”

The title of this book refers to “after empire,” but I am not claiming that China today has nothing in common with the old empire. I am claiming that by the 1890s, Chinese elites were beginning to think about what would come after empire. By “empire” I mean the traditional dynastic state. I also

mean to distinguish empire from the modern nation insofar as empires tend to claim universal rule in some sense; to in fact rule over diverse peoples bound together in their loyalty to the monarchy; and to mix patrimonial kingship with a legal-bureaucratic system of civil rule. Naturally, in those cases when nations are formed out of empires, they inherit a good deal even while rejecting imperial structures.² I am not claiming that intellectuals of the late Qing abandoned the civilizing mission (*jiaohua*) of Confucian culture, and it is obvious that the Republic of China was founded in the twentieth century as a multinational state—though how this was conceived still needs explaining. I *am* claiming late Qing intellectuals could no longer imagine a future in which the form of the state was monarchical or made claims to universal rule. On the contrary, they came to imagine a state composed of citizens. This book is thus about political modernity. The 1911 Revolution marked an enormous political rupture, the result of social, cultural, economic, and institutional changes underway for a generation or more. The questions it raised and the tensions it brought to the fore still preoccupy Chinese today; political modernity is an unfinished project.

All history-writing is simultaneously an attempt to get at the history of the thing and part of an ongoing conversation among historians. This book is intended for general readers with little background in Chinese studies, though some knowledge of the state of the world at the turn of the twentieth century is assumed. I hope that the people and ideas discussed here are understandable to a reader who has never heard of Yuan Shikai or Liang Qichao. All the same, I am writing in a tradition of scholarship on China. From time to time in the pages below, I will comment on the previous findings of historians. The issues I examine are not new. In the 1960s, Joseph Levenson noted the dramatic disjuncture between traditional China as a universal empire, or the Tianxia (“all under Heaven”), and the modern nation-state with its demands to a particular identity.³ The formula of Levenson’s *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate* was perhaps a bit too pat, but it inspires the pages that follow. One way to clarify the issues it raises is to focus on the concept of sovereignty. As Levenson also pointed out, the shift from culturalism to nationalism meant that the very meaning of tradition had to change: whatever modern Chinese felt about the classical texts, the tradition could no longer be taken for granted.