

## Preface

This is a study primarily of political thought. I began with a set of simple questions. How did the Chinese people stop believing in the emperor in the late Qing period and decide to overturn a monarchical system that could be traced back over two thousand years—in some respects over three thousand years? Did the foreign origins of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) really weaken it after 260 years of rule? What made it possible to suddenly imagine a Chinese state without the emperor—what conditions of political possibility had emerged by the end of the nineteenth century? For millennia the monarchy had held a central position in any conception of Chinese politics and culture: how could it be replaced? And whatever replaced it, did ideas about the monarchy collapse and disappear, or did they continue to influence the shape of the post-imperial political order? How did the monarchy manifest itself in the daily lives of people as its institutional basis broke down? What did the court do to make its presence known and press claims to its indispensability? Above all, how were these claims attacked? How did new republican rituals come to replace the old imperial rituals after 1912?

These questions turned out not to be so simple and led to further questions. What does it even mean to speak of a “belief in” the emperor—supposedly “Son of Heaven” and possessor of Heaven’s mandate—while it was no secret that emperors were all-too-fallible men? Was it the Qing’s policies or the entire emperor system that proved incompatible with the changes China was undergoing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? If the Qing had been Han Chinese instead of Manchu, would it have survived in some form? Yet put another way, the question is not how the Qing failed but how did popular attitudes change so that its overthrow made sense? Could new political institutions ever replace the numerous functions that the emperor (or the idea of the emperor) performed? Once the emperor was no longer, did this create a sudden vacuum? Or was the

monarchy already so outmoded that its fall simply cleared the ground for the construction of better institutions?

I am sure these are important questions—not the only important questions about China around the turn of the twentieth century, but certainly among them. I am less certain I have answered them well. At the least, a focus on how Chinese proposed that the state should be reconstructed offers new perspectives on a familiar modern story: from subject to citizen, slavery to liberty, and ignorance to enlightenment. In another, older version, from colonial oppression to national independence. This is a story with special resonance in America, but it is known everywhere; it is a story claimed by all revolutions and by all colonized peoples. It has long supplied our story of modernity: from the unthinking traditional to rationality, or from superstition to science and secularism. Or in less optimistic terms, to disenchantment of the world and cold utilitarianism, to social institutions of disciplinarity and governmentality.

These are well-known “stories,” and I do not intend to deny their truths but to suggest that they imperfectly capture the discursive frameworks of Chinese modernity. The Revolution of 1911 replaced a monarchical system with a republic. The republic was heavily flavored with the taste of military dictatorship and soon fell into warlordism, but the ideal of republicanism continued to motivate intellectuals and activists. At the same time, the range of beliefs that had surrounded the emperorship survived the revolution: the need for enlightened rulers, the power of sageliness, the paternalistic responsibilities of the educated classes, and a moralized cosmology. The 1911 Revolution could not have happened unless large numbers of people were prepared to accept an emperor-less world, but it did not only overthrow entrenched views: it built on them as well.

China’s rejection of millennia of dynastic rule was a product of world historical trends—as Chinese intellectuals often argued at the time—but it followed a twisting and turning path. This path led from one set of beliefs about relations among the sacred, political legitimacy, and textual authority to, eventually, a new set of beliefs if not a new common faith. It does not matter whether we call these beliefs stories, myths, or the discovery of the rational, though it does matter that the revolutions of twentieth-century China vehemently claimed to operate in the name of civilization

and rationality. Chinese elites and commoners moved from a belief in the cosmic and charismatic role of the emperor to deep-seated skepticism in the course of just two generations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The traditional emperorship had affirmed moral values held by the whole community; the collapse of the monarchy was therefore a significant part of widespread cultural crisis. The fall of the last dynasty, the Qing, represented the collapse not just of a single dynasty but of the entire imperial system, though this was not clear to all in the immediate wake of the revolution. The whole cultural edifice of the imperial system declined together, including: first, the coercive powers of the imperial court vis-à-vis local society; second, the civil service examination system that recruited the bureaucracy and reaffirmed the cultural capital of the gentry; and third, the immense system of classical (sacred) learning upon which the exams were based.

“Story” singular is surely a misleading description of this book. I have pursued tangents and explored byways, or at least started down them: one issue does lead to another and to yet another. Still, this study focuses on changes in Chinese views of the emperorship from the early essays of Kang Youwei (1858–1927) in the 1880s, perhaps the first writings to fundamentally challenge the monarchy, to the expulsion of the last Qing emperor from the Forbidden City in 1924 in an atmosphere of iconoclasm. I discuss other figures of the intellectual stature and creativity of Kang in the pages that follow, especially his disciple Liang Qichao (1873–1929). I see Liang as a particularly eloquent and sensitive bellwether who reflected and anticipated key ideas of the age. But this is not an intellectual biography of the journalist-scholar Liang. Rather, in addition to major figures, I cite the works of students, anonymous editorialists, and textbooks, and I look at political movements and political rituals in order to understand a great transformation.

The theocratic nature of the monarchy—the emperor’s cosmic role as the pivot between Heaven and Earth and as the provider of peace and order among humans—became rapidly attenuated not just among a tiny minority of radicals but among the urban classes generally. Theocratic modes of thought we might call “imperial Confucianism” were replaced by such radically new modes of thought as evolutionism and utilitarian-

ism and notions of democracy. This happened first among intellectuals and students educated in the new schools that educational reformers had begun to establish by the 1890s, next spread among merchants, Overseas Chinese, and the urban classes generally, and finally (and only partially) among the petty landlords and peasants of rural China. At first, these new modes of thought undermined the foundation of the monarchy without being able to replace them. Then the end came quickly. The ease with which the Chinese monarchy fell was perhaps only apparently less traumatic than the English or French Revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Indeed, as we know, it long proved impossible to fashion a new, stable system of government on the ruins of the old. It is also worth noting the political strength that monarchical movements maintained even into the 1920s, especially in northern China and Manchuria. Finally, then, this study in a more preliminary way also touches on the effects that the fall of the monarchy had on Chinese culture.

A topic like this is not amenable to exhaustive treatment. At least, I cannot claim to have read every relevant document, or even more than a small fraction of political pamphlets, official memorials, memoirs, newspaper accounts, and essays in political philosophy of the period. Further research would certainly enrich our picture of the age and might alter my argument. Some of the journalistic essays discussed in this book might be regarded as the late Qing equivalent of blogging: they represent breadth rather than depth, they are quick and often excited reports of only partially digested new readings, they are responses to other essays by friends and enemies, and they are replete with personal put-downs and point-scoring. But they are serious, and they reflect earnest attempts to understand a revolutionary milieu.



Oddly, in the many years I have been pursuing this topic, no one ever asked me about my personal feelings toward monarchism. Could I be a closet monarchist? This perhaps seems absurd, yet we live in a society saturated with monarchical longings. Even venerable democratic societies long for a leader who can solve all their problems. In popular culture, the *Return of the King* (part three of Tolkien's ring cycle) found a rapt audience for

its “good king” ideology at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The Feast of Christ the King is celebrated by many Christians. Actual monarchies are alive and well in many parts of the world. It is true that the old notions of divine right, chakravartin kingship, sage-rulers, sun goddess descendants, and the like have lost much of their magic. It is true that the line between kingship and kleptocracy is pretty thin. But it is also true that peoples from around the world, including those of industrial powers and oil-rich sultanates, continue to identify one way or another with their kings, which is to say largely father-to-son inheritance of a right to reign if not rule. Europe alone includes several kingdoms, a grand duchy, a duchy, and two principalities, not to mention the papacy (an elected monarchy). There are four monarchies in Southeast Asia, at least four in Africa (not counting subnational monarchies), and several in the Mideast, Oceania, and Asia, including Japan.

However, the fact remains that monarchy is not what it once was, and its cosmological basis disintegrated in the French Revolution. Somewhat over a century later, between 1905 and 1912, democratic revolution came to the Ottoman empire, Iran, Mexico, Portugal, and Russia, as well as China. (Other countries also had democracy movements that could claim varying degrees of success.) If kingship survived or revived in some of these cases, it was also remade. Monarchism became associated with conservatism and reaction. It provided a basis of reactionary ideology in the wake of the French Revolution if not even earlier. Precisely because of this, though, we can think of monarchism as sometimes providing the basis of resistance—resistance above all to the modernizing nation-state embedded in the capitalist world-system. This has been a resistance not, of course, limited to syphilitic old aristocrats, but has frequently fueled popular revolt by offering an image of a more stable and arguably fairer world. Monarchism has been a powerful source of identity, and again not merely for aristocrats, in tumultuous times. No longer linked to cosmological sources of power, it is linked to collective consciousness and serves nationalism.

Most of human history—from the origins of Neolithic farming to the coming of the Industrial Revolution—was shaped by kings. Even the most venerable of democratic societies is short-lived compared to the millennia

of human experience with kingship. The choice to do without a king is thus a momentous decision. The first remaining kingdom of the twenty-first century to become a republic was Nepal, a kingdom created through conquest some 250 years previously. The Nepalese royal house abdicated in 2008 as required by a vote by a special assembly after years of guerilla resistance, a Maoist insurgency that took over ten thousand lives, widespread discontent, economic collapse, and family dysfunction (the abdicating king, King Gyanendra, took the throne in 2001 on the death of his brother King Birendra, when the crown prince killed Birendra and most of the royal family and then shot himself). Nepal's path to republicanism, far from assured at this writing, was rocky indeed. So has China's been.



**Romanization and Characters:** Chinese and Japanese names are given surname first. Romanization of Chinese follows the Hanyu pinyin system for Mandarin, except for names better known in other forms (such as Sun Yat-sen for Sun Yixian, Sun Zhongshan). In quoting from Western writings, I modify their original romanization of Chinese words into Hanyu pinyin; I do not alter titles or names in citations. The List of Characters uses traditional characters, as were used in the period under discussion; citations follow the traditional or the simplified characters of the work being cited.