

Political History and Structure with Dr. Renqiu Yu (part 1)

John Major: Welcome to another session of Asia Society's online China course. I'm John Major and with me today is Professor Renqiu Yu of the State University of New York at Purchase. He is a specialist in Chinese government and political history and that is the subject of today's session.

Now, in the 19th century the impact [of the West] came very rapidly and with very drastic consequences. You have the opium trade and the Opium War¹, the beginnings of the treaty port system, and then almost immediately, the Taiping Rebellion². Suddenly, the Qing dynasty was in very deep trouble. What about the transition in the late 19th century? Was there any hope of an effective imperial response, or do you think all of those efforts were doomed in some way?

Renqiu Yu: Well, in general terms, we know what happened. That is, the Western challenge and the large-scale domestic rebellion took place at the same time, simultaneously. The Opium War from 1839 – 42 and the second Opium War from 1858 – 60 and then the Taiping Rebellion from 1851 – 64, then the Muslim Rebellion in the northwestern part [of China], the Nien Rebellion³ in north-central China, both in the 1870s. So there were multiple crises from within and without. A lot of problems here: the ruling class was quite shocked by the widespread crises at this time. What I think happened is this: the Qing rulers tried to use traditional means to deal with domestic rebellions. They allowed some new measures, like allowing the Han Chinese to organize militia forces—their own provincial military forces—to deal with the Taiping. But the problem was that the Taiping occupied the southern and southeastern part of China. Traditionally, these were the tax bases of the empire. The empire had to increase taxes in other parts, and that had caused rebellion in other parts, in northeastern parts of China.

Major: So that's a downward spiral.

Yu: That's right. That was their problem and that was their pre-occupation. That probably partially explains why they were so slow in understanding the nature [of the challenge] from the West and responding to the Western challenge at this time. I think that by the late 1860s – 70s, when the Manchu rulers began to realize that they must begin to adopt new initiatives or policies to deal with this. The initiatives had to be a self-strengthening movement. They found that one change of policy would lead to the necessity to change [other] policies: you change this policy, you allow the Han officials to organize the military forces and you allow them to collect taxes and tolls in their own community, then you allow them to have power, either in the provinces or in the central government. You begin to see that the Han officials really began to have political power.

Now at this time, it was [not yet a] problem: the Manchus and the Chinese share the same interest in dealing with domestic rebellion, in the preserving of Confucian order and Chinese culture and in defending China's security. But eventually, and particularly after the Chinese defeat in the Sino-Japanese War, people began to realize that the government failed in defending Chinese national independence, sovereignty and national interests. They began to blame

¹ The First Opium War (1834-1843) was a war between Great Britain and China over China's attempt to end British opium smuggling. It ended with China's defeat and the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842. Hong Kong Island was ceded to Great Britain, a treaty port system was set up, and a system of unequal treaties began.

² Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864) was a large scale, millenarian anti-Manchu rebellion which occupied much of the south and central part of China under the leadership of a quasi-Christian mystic, Hong Xiuquan, who considered himself to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ. The term is from the name the rebels gave their state -Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace (Taiping). Some 20 million-40 million Chinese died as a result.

³ Around time of the Rebellion, the Wade-Giles system of Chinese Romanization was popular. Today the pinyin system dominates. This article uses the both systems; each instance is based on what is typically used in Western scholarship.

the government. The Han Chinese began to blame the Manchus. By the 1890s, the tension between the Manchus and the Chinese intensified and that provided the opportunity for the Chinese revolutionaries to find a political issue to address this. “Anti-Manchu” became the first phrase of the revolutionary Chinese nationalists. Therefore, by this time, the nature of the domestic challenge to the Manchu regime also changed. It became revolutionary.

Major: There were two other very important movements in progress: Sun Yat-sen was already traveling abroad and raising money for a revolutionary movement, and within China you have the organization of the Boxer Uprising. What was the impact of those two movements? After all, the Qing dynasty fell in 1911, so it was clearly on its last legs.

Yu: I think that, on Dr. Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionary theory and movement, there are much more consensus. On the Boxer Uprising, as you know, the controversy continues even today in Beijing. We do not have time to go into detail there, but I can make a very general observation here: I think the Boxer Uprising movement reveals that, at the popular level, at the grassroots level, the Chinese people pretty much followed the same traditional approach. That is, the traditional means will guide us to solve today’s problems, [through] their practice of traditional folk religion, and all those spirit possessions and all those rituals—this is how I see it. On the other hand, I think the Boxer Uprising also demonstrates a very popular sentiment in China that the reality is not acceptable [ie, when conditions were very difficult for ordinary people]. The country, the government and the people must deal with these [difficult] realities and must do something. As a revolutionary, as a genuine statesman, Dr. Sun Yat-sen very much appreciated that national mood. He very much summed this up in his Three Principles of the People: *nationalism*, that is, to deal with China’s sovereignty, national independence issues; *democracy*, that is, to deal with what kind of a [political] form China should have. Dr. Sun Yat-sen by this time pretty much rejected the idea of a constitutional monarchy and believed that a republican form of government would make China fit into the modern world. And finally, [the Third Principle]: his *Minsheng zhuyi* [Minsheng principle], or people’s livelihood. . . *minsheng zhuyi* really needs more discussion, more attention—I believe that this is Dr. Sun Yat-sen’s important theoretical contribution to China’s construction of a modern nation-state. *Minsheng zhuyi* really combined Western theories and traditional Confucian ideals.

Major: Yes, it really relies on government in a very traditional way. Do you look out for the welfare of the people? He’s harking back, in some ways, to ideas that were articulated as early as the Han dynasty.

Yu: Yes.

Major: Now, the 1911 revolution is a very interesting revolution in that it involved very little military force. Suddenly the Qing dynasty government seemed to collapse under its own weight. Into that vacuum stepped the first Chinese republic. And Sun Yat-sen had the task, all of a sudden, of trying to organize a government and to recreate a new political structure for a new China. Now that broke down very quickly. Could you give us a summary of why the early attempt at republic building in China was so difficult?

Yu: The mood in China in the early 20th century—let’s say from 1895 to 1911—I think today it’s probably very difficult to understand. Among the elites, among the intellectuals, there was a very urgent sense [of a need] to find solutions to China’s problems. After the Boxer Uprising, China was called the sick man of East Asia, which really indicated the helplessness of China. I think if you consider: the Sino-Japanese War, in which China was defeated; the imperialists’ scramble for concessions in China from 1897 – 98; the Boxer Uprising and the brutal suppression of the Boxer Uprising by the imperialist powers in 1900; and the Boxer Protocol, these are all tremendous humiliations to the Chinese.

After the reform of 1898⁴, reformers Kang Youwei⁵ and Liang Qichao were exiled to Japan. Japan always played a role in China's search for a solution to their problems in modern times. One was the shocking experience of being defeated by this small island country. Then, China began examining Japanese experiences in modernizing their political institutions and their economy. Then, the Japanese national mobilization for the Russo-Japanese War, and eventually their success in that war all tremendously impressed the Chinese. You add all these things together, also the conflict between the Manchus and the Chinese and the constant attack on the conservative Manchus: Empress Dowager Cixi, Prince Chun, Prince Qin, all those conservative Manchus. That really added to the rise of Chinese revolutionary nationalism. That's why Dr. Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary theory to overthrow the Manchu government, to overthrow the imperial system, became so popular among the Chinese who were searching for a solution to the country's problems.

What happened between 1908 and 1911 in China was also quite interesting. The Manchu rulers who controlled the politics, Prince Chun⁶, the father of the boy emperor Guangxu, and also his father Prince Qin, really did not have any imagination to [win] the support of the Han Chinese. I think they made a lot of fatal mistakes, like when they organized the so-called Manchu Cabinet in 1910 and they made the decision to nationalize the railways, which all offended the Chinese. That provided the opportunities for the Chinese to really identify the Manchus as a declining and incapable regime, which [had to be] overthrown. The Manchus by that time also could not really organize any pro-Manchu or supporting Manchu forces. Also by that time, actually, the forces working towards China's national unity and for China's national independence were much stronger.

Major: But then it turns out that getting rid of the Manchus is the easy part.

Yu: That's right.

Major: And the hard part is figuring out what to do next. Now, why did the republic fail so rapidly? Or I would one would assume that one could say it failed. The process of republican government between, say, 1912 – 16 or even up into the 1920s, was really one of great difficulty in organizing a government that would meet new and changing needs in China in the 20th century.

Yu: Fundamentally, the early Republican era, that is to say from 1912 to, let's say, 1916 (until the death of Yuan Shikai⁷) is to find effective ways and means to reach national cohesion, a culture of cohesion and to establish the authority of

⁴ Also known as the "100 Days Reform". The reform movement was prompted by the conclusion of the first Sino-Japanese war and the Treaty of Shimonoseki.

⁵ Kang Youwei was the most prominent of the late 19th century reformers and advocates of constitutional monarchy modeled on the Japanese Meiji Reforms. After the disastrous failure of the "100 Days of Reform," Kang fled to Japan. His younger brother, also a reformer, was captured and executed.

⁶ Seventh son of Daoguang Emperor, father of Guangxu.

⁷ Yuan Shikai (1859-1916) was a Chinese military officer who first rose to prominence as an officer in Korea during the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-5). He later became a general in charge of the Beiyang Army, one of the new western-style armies that was created in the face of the Taiping Rebellion. Yuan allied himself with Qing court conservatives to oppose the 100 Days Reform and then later used his court connections to become appointed Prime Minister. Just before his appointment, the Wuchang Uprising of October 10, 1911 toppled the Qing, and Yuan used his position as head of the Beiyang army to pressure Sun Yatsen and the weaker revolutionary forces into appointing him (Yuan) president of the new Republic. By 1913, Yuan opposed democratic elections and is widely suspected of complicity in the assassination of the head of the majority party, Song Jiaoren. Yuan capitulated to a number of Japan's notorious Twenty-One Demands in 1915, and then, under the advice of American political scientist Frank Goodnow, began steps to coronate himself emperor of China. He died of kidney failure in 1916 and China descended into warlordism.

the national government, to deal with foreign powers and also domestic problems effectively. If we contextualize this, we will see that Yuan Shikai was facing constant changes at this time. The Manchus were gone by 1912. Yuan Shikai felt that he had the need to strengthen the power of the central government. And we know that when he became president, in 1912, actually, his effective control of Chinese territories was mainly the areas surrounding Beijing and Hebei, or Zhili,⁸ and those places. It took Dr. Sun Yat-sen's second revolution for him to have an opportunity to really expand his control beyond the northern parts of China.

On top of that, [there was] imperialist politics. Russia had always wanted to keep its sphere of influence in China. And the Japanese took the opportunity of World War I to put tremendous pressure on China to give in to the Japanese demands—the notorious Twenty-One Demands made of China in January 1915. Now, in that context, you have very radical demands from the revolutionaries, from the radicalized intellectuals, demanding complete change, complete transformation of society and political institutions. To a great extent, those intellectual leaders in the 1910s, like Chen Duxiu⁹, pretty much share the sentiment of Kang Youwei in 1898. They had an urgent sense that, if [they didn't] do something, the country would be extinct, [so they had] to do something very quickly. I think Yuan Shikai probably also had that urgent sense: that's why by 1915, he tried to restore the monarchy. Then, to his surprise, he was out of touch with reality because the mood in the country was not for the restoration of the monarchy. The country would very much like to have an effective government, but in the form of a republic, not in the form of a monarchy. He misunderstood the country; he died in frustration in 1916. The problem was that after 1916 there was no meaningful cooperation of the people who controlled the military forces, like the warlords, who established those political institutions, like the provincial assemblies at the provincial level, and also the intellectuals.

The intellectuals now engaged in the May Fourth New Cultural Movement. The country became fragmented. Power, again particularly the power of the central government, became fragmented.

⁸ Hebei Province was known as Zhili before 1928.

⁹ Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) was one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party along with Li Dazhao. Chen, as a revolutionary and writer, was one of the founders of the May Fourth Movement. He promoted the use of vernacular Chinese (as opposed to classical Chinese) in publications to reach wider audiences.