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**Understanding the Defeat of China’s**

**1911 Democratic Breakthrough**

Edward Friedman

[friedman@polisci.edu](mailto:friedman@polisci.edu)

**1911 Contextualized**

It has become a commonplace in the study of revolution to claim, following Tocqueville, that, in the long run, the only winner from revolution is the state. This cynicism about revolution was intensified, for some, in 1991with the implosion of the USSR and the fall of the CPSU from power. The global promise of the Jacobin tendency of the French revolution as embodied in the state project constructed by V.I. Lenin and his Bolshevik Party now seemed a dead end, indeed worse than a dead end. The joke line became that socialism was a transition between capitalism and ... capitalism, the longest transition.

An alternative view, the one embraced in this essay, takes seriously the revolutionary transformations embodied in the end of agrarian empires. These political systems informed and deformed human prospects for millennia. China’s last emperor fell in 1911. But over the course of the prior couple of centuries, imperiums, which reduced most people to subjects and raised those few of so-called royal or noble blood to status, wealth and power had come to be exposed, because of the rise of the nation-state project, as backwardness, ways of thought and rule which denied the blessings and possibilities for a good life to most of humanity. The new nation state promised equal opportunity to all its citizens, an extraordinary leap in human possibility. Revolutions such as China’s in 1911 therefore embody truly revolutionary agendas.

From that perspective, revolution can be considered a political manifestation of the transvaluation of values which discredits agrarian empires and holds out to all humanity, what a scholar of the history of revolution describes as “new concepts of the self and citizen, and the idea of popular rights.” Revolution then is a promise for a more just life of dignity. China’s 1911 revolution is one of many revolutions which flowed from the delegitmation of agrarian empires. Its meaning is clarified by global and comparative perspectives.

A number of these revolutionary efforts rose and fell quickly in the era just before the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution. They are studied in Charles Kurzman’s excellent 2008 book, Democracy Denied 1905-1915. He compares Mexico, Portugal, Iran, the Ottoman, Russia and China. Kurzman borrows his data on each case first and foremost, he writes, from a handful of books that “I took to be the best overall histories of each case,” for the 1911 revolution, “Edward Friedman’s The Center Cannot Hold” (22), which is subtitled “The Failure of Parliamentary Democracy in China from the Chinese Revolution of 1911 to the World War in 1914.”

Since Kurzman understands China, world history and revolution in a particular way, I will draw, in this paper, on different theories of revolution and my own dissertation data, cited above by Kurzman, based on archival research starting in 1964, and try to clarify some larger significances of China’s 1911 revolution. The rapid defeat of the promise of 1911 will be clarified by situating it in a context whose forces and dynamics similarly defeated all these other revolutions that Kurzman’s scholarship ably and wisely explores.

Modernizing revolutions compel the un-modern to change or die. Back in the Tang dynasty, people living under the rule of the Li lineage emperors enjoyed such awesome wealth and strength and knowledge that worried neighbors found that they had to copy and learn from Tang practices or face the prospect of losing their independence to that powerful empire. Empires everywhere, after all, act on a logic of offensive realism, expanding as far as their power permits. A millennium after the Tang, new state capacities in Europe to raise money and fund a mighty military premised on new technologies such as iron making, ship building, steam power and advanced finance, as with the Tang’s earlier leap forward, compelled other polities to learn from the newly modern or to risk losing their independence. This reality of compelled modernization informed Qing era state choices by the 19th century.

Great empires, however, did not just surrender to the newly modern. The Manchu Qing dynasty, which had conquered and ruled the Sinified region once dominated by the Zhu royal household of the Ming dynasty, also governed the Manchu homeland northeast of the Great Wall, and incorporated Mongolia, East Turkestan, Tibet, southwest hill peoples, and Taiwan. It was a strong state of strong capacities. Given the European modern challenge, the Qing’s cost of domestic and international security sky-rocketed. The Aisingoro ruling household tried to maintain stable power by keeping taxes on Qing subjects low and by making deals with local power holders which allowed them to raise militaries to secure and defend the empire against challenges both domestic and international. This worked for quite a while.

But when the Manchus in 1895 lost a war fought around Korea to Meiji Japan and when an 1898 effort at reform and constitutional governance was crushed by the Manchu old guard and their Han loyalists, of whom Yuan Shikai became the key military leader, Han nationalism rose against Manchu rule, especially in the more open south with its burgeoning print culture. Because of the new nation-state project, Manchu policies became understood as a betrayal of the Han Chinese people, as with foreign loans for railway building that seemed to sell out Chinese sovereignty.

A transvaluation of values had occurred. Han Chinese insisted on a right to rule themselves, to live as equal citizens with careers open for those with talents to rise, for a public realm in which to discuss public issues, and for constitutional governance to protect the blessings of the modern. When the Qing was challenged by an insurgency on October 10, 1911 in Wuhan, anti-Manchu pogroms ensued. All over the country, local gentry, merchants, and modern professionals replaced the monarchy with provincial assemblies backed by recently strengthened modernized militaries, new armies. Given the prior Qing policies of localizing military power, the provinces had a military foundation, albeit a costly one, on which to erect somewhat autonomous power. Unity and the strength of the center to stand up to international challenges became harder.

Modern politics emerged, pitting a left against a right. The left was identified with youth, ideals and the south, the right with age, experience and the north. Each imagined a historical narrative which made its side the true patriots. The left would build a modern republic via popular government that would make the Chinese people rich and the Chinese nation strong so that China could stand up to and defend against threats from Russia in the north, Japan in the East, France in the South, and Britain from everywhere, but most importantly from British capital in a globalized financial age dynamized by British bank capital, an era often eventually thought of by many Chinese in terms reminiscent of Lenin’s notion of finance imperialism. The left would mobilize people to fight imperialism.

The right would build from the top-down, using the old imperial state and the northern military to restore order. It would use foreign loans to build-up a strong state. To the north, the south was led by naïve hot-heads who would provoke and alienate the world powers, thereby causing more foreign intervention in China and a further loss of Chinese sovereignty, a repetition of the practices and humiliations of the Boxer Rebellion. Each, to itself, was truly patriotic.

After the 1911 revolution, the north would defeat the south. The elite camp of order would crush the popular camp of justice and inclusion. But the north would not be able to end China’s pre-revolutionary condition of multiple sovereignties, the ability of local power holders with local militaries to resist the center. Despite the 1911 revolution, the late Qing crisis, which left the central state and poor rural households vulnerable, persisted after 1911. Warlordism, chaos, civil war and invasion would spread until the armies of the Chinese Communist Party conquered state power and unified the country in 1949. That made China a world power.

But this version of history, whatever truth it contains, obscures the international context. What happened in China after 1911, the closing of a democratic opening in the years before what is called the First World War[[1]](#footnote-1) also occurred in Iran, Turkey, Portugal, Mexico and Russia. Consequently, the deeper significance of the 1911 revolution can be better clarified by placing it in both global and comparative contexts, especially the changing nature of international finance.

The 1911 revolution can be celebrated as Chinese President Hu Jintao did on the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. “The Revolution of 1911 led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen put an end to the autocratic [monarchical] rule that had existed in [the region today known as] China.” But given Sun’s state socialist commitments and the program of his southern revolutionary colleagues who took power after the 1911 revolution in a very commercialized Guangdong, is the defeat of their modernizing revolution best explained by a notion that “revolutions led by bourgeois revolutionaries or other attempts to copy Western capitalism” could not uproot the reactionary basis for feudal rule? Oddly, as Lenin, so both northern military conservative leader Yuan Shikai and socialist revolutionary Sun Yat-sen, tried to figure out the relevance of, and then build on, the lessons from the rapid rise of a Prussianized Germany to catch up with industrial revolution leader Great Britain through the use of state power. That German rise captured the imagination of late modernizers. Meiji Japan also mimed Prussianized Germany. Late modernizers, left or right, tended to be statists.

After Germany lost the First World War and initiated a Second World War in alliance with the militarist regime of Emperor Hirohito, many forgot the extraordinary earlier attractiveness of a statist Prussianized Germany as a model for speedy economic catching-up and ending weakness and backwardness.

Of course, the dominant powers of Europe would not help a China catch-up. The monarchical forces of reaction in Europe after 1815 were known as the Holy Alliance. In opposition were the anti-monarchical forces of the modern nation state with their promise of equal citizenship. To Sun Yat-sen, still in the late nineteenth century, this global revolutionary force was progressive and liberating. It allowed for revolutionary alliances. His party identified with a need for a revolutionary transformation. Sun’s party was the Chinese Revolutionary Alliance, Zhongguo geming tongmenghui (CRA).

Nationalists everywhere tend to construct myths of lonely and unique heroic struggles and down-play the global context. Conscious today of millennia of long distance exchanges of genes and culture and technology even long before the great Silk Roads networks of communication and transportation connected the ancient Mediterranean civilizations to the Pacific, a serious national history instead has to be situated both in its international context and in its diverse ethnic, communalist and regional histories, an approach which undermines the nationalist urge to tell the story of the nation as if it were simply the history of a unique blood people. The rise of the American nation, for example, can no longer be singularly about English Protestants as if native Americans, black Africans, Catholic Spanish, and diverse European continentals did not also importantly shape the history of the nation. So it should be with China and its 1911 revolution and the construction of a new Chinese nation which included inspirations from Indian notions of Pan Asianism and from European-derived Christianity.

Modern political scientists, in addition, would ask two questions about the failure of the south, of Song Jiaoren, Sun Yat-sen and the supporters of constitutional governance in China after 1911 to institutionalize their democratic breakthrough and keep it viable. First, were there errors in crafting the democracy’s political institutions? Chinese did not yet even have a common spoken language. A peace pact of conciliation among the contesting forces probably required a strong federalism and concessions to authoritarian elites. But federalism was not much on the minds of modern nationalists building the new republic. Nor was the notion of enclaves to protect reactionary military interests. Hopefully, democratic crafters, learning from Chile, South Africa, India, Brazil, etc. could do much better today. People are reflexive. They learn and change. 2011 is not 1911. Crafters in 1912 fixated on a parliamentary political system based on an election as soon as possible.

Analysts of democratic crafting instead stress the importance of constructing identifiable national parties so that citizens can choose a party whose general orientations, its ideology, resonates with voters. China, in 1911, lacked such an inheritance. It could not quickly build such a democratic party system. That lack would make the parliamentary seem unprincipled and chaotic, as detailed below. This party failure made a military strongman seem a welcome alternative to many Chinese, and not just northern conservatives. Delaying elections and allowing parties to build would have been a better course of action. Quickie elections are not a wise choice.

A second question is, what policies could have expanded the number of moderates so politics did not polarize such that the political choice of Chinese did not merely come to pit anti-democrats of the right against anti-democrats of the left? Nothing was possible without conciliating the Chinese militaries, which had grown during the late Qing decline. As with Chile’s openness to authoritarian enclaves for the military so the authoritarian military regime of General Pinochet would not oppose post-Pinochet democratization, constitutional engineers today know how important it is to craft to conciliate the military and old elites. These types of issues were not in the minds of the Chinese crafters or any democratic crafters in 1911. The social scientific study of regime transitions was in its infancy.

What then prevented the institutionalization of the 1911 opening to democracy in China? Why by the end of the First World War had politics polarized between an anti-democratic left and an anti-democratic right? To sketch some possible solutions to those large questions, beyond the matter of mistakes in crafting, requires both looking at the international context, especially the particular moment in international finance, and placing China’s structures and dynamics in comparative perspective, thereby to clarify how many nations, not just China, in this era, found powerful anti-democratic forces rolling back the original, albeit quite fragile, democratic opening.

To quickly recapitulate, the uprising in Wuhan on October 10, 1911, usually referred to as the 1911 revolution, will be treated in this paper as one event in a long struggle to build a modern nation-state. That is, it was part of a global transformation which ended the long era of agrarian empires. For millennia, most people on the planet earth had been brought up to be worshipful subjects of divine monarchs. What was normal for so many generations was in short order re-interpreted as backwardness and an indignity because of the rise and legitimation of the ideals of the modern nation-state.

A revolution, the German philosopher Hegel contended, first occurred in the realm of consciousness. The real revolution was a transvaluation of values which legitimated a new and more liberating political agenda. In the modern revolution, instead of there being a natural, lower order of the ruled, all nationals, whatever their blood inheritance, should be treated equally and have equal opportunity. In a modern state, where careers should be open to talents and not to blood inheritance, subjects would be replaced by citizens. It then seemed unjust for the Manchu conquerors of Ming China and Mongolia and Tibet and Taiwan, etcetera, to monopolize the key positions and exclude Han Chinese except for those who sold out their own people.

A central truth of modern nation-states, that they are the heirs of expansionist agrarian empires, is obscured by the standard nationalist narrative of a purely defensive struggle of a supposedly victimized people. The Manchu imperial expansion challenged Russian Tsarist imperial expansion to the west and north, French imperial expansion to the south, and Japanese imperial expansion to the East. There were no established territorial boundaries in an imperial era where might made right. All pressed out.

These factors are readily clarified by comparisons. For China, 2011 is the 100th anniversary of the republican revolution of 1911. For the English, 2011 is the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James version of the Bible, an important moment both in creating a nation with a common mother tongue and, as Christopher Hill detailed in his 1993 study of “The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution,” in changing popular consciousness so as to delegitimate divine monarchy and to legitimate executing the king. The creation of the nation-state brings revolutionary changes to the new nation’s citizens and their notions of right and wrong.

For the English, 2011 is also the 100th anniversary of the last time their constitutional monarch had set foot in Ireland. As heirs of an expansive empire, the English fought for many bloody years to keep the Irish people, imagined as a lower order of being, from having their own nation-state. Patriotic Englishmen legitimated and coercively imposed the notion of Ireland as correctly ruled from London until confronted by an Irish struggle for freedom in the midst of the First World War, a war which greatly weakened imperial Britain and thereby changed the world. England would lack the financial wherewithal to again do to other peoples what it did to China in the 1911 revolution.

Such truths are unpalatable to patriots. No proud people readily welcomes truths about its militaristic, selfish and brutal past which reveal how the attempt to build its own nation can impose indignities and inhumanities on numerous other communities. Revolution thereby is inherently a contested topic.

A similar blindness has recently surfaced in French historiography. Since July 14, 1789, the liberation of the Bastille political prison, French have explained the politics of their modern state as originating in an uprising of the French people against an alien monarchy, hiding that the French agrarian empire long had conquered other people and even administered slave colonies in places such as Haiti where Toussaint Louverture led, against post 1789 France, the only successful slave revolution in human history. It is ever more obvious that one cannot fully understand the project of building a French nation-state, or any major nation-state, without comprehending the impact of its imperial heritage. The empire long remains a virus inside the national body politic.

It is said that every revolution is also a restoration. Mao Zedong’s identification with certain ancient emperors is well-known. The Chinese state promotes, and the Chinese people welcome, movies and television shows about militarily strong, conquering emperors. Revolution is not just a rupture. The Soviet Union of Lenin and Stalin incorporated the territorial conquests of the Tsars, continuing a prison-house of nationalities. Although Mao criticized this Soviet socialist imperialism, Gorbachev is reviled in Russia, and mocked by many in China, for having lost the empire. There are always a large number of patriots who embrace the military and imperial agenda and resist the logic of the modern nation-state which stands in favor of the sovereign rights of peoples, Haitian, Irish, Mongol, etc.

As with England and France, so with China, the project of building a modern nation-state inevitably and centrally includes the invisible consequences of not facing up to the real meaning of the imperial heritage. 1911 is when Mongols won their independence from the Manchu imperium. Only by seeing how a particular case is similar to like events elsewhere and different in other ways can one understand the event. The 1911 revolution in China, while sharing the project of England in the 17th century and France in the 18th century, in seeking to build a modern nation-state, was also different because of the different nature of international finance in 1911 in comparison to 1611 or 1789. 2011 is different again. The international context can change the odds by which – and how – forces succeed or fail. This is why British capital was crucial to the outcome of the 1911 revolution in China. It surely does not worry a world power China in 2011.

Kurzman’s comparative study of the failed democratic openings of the pre-WWI era concludes that the revolutionary forces lacked the military wherewithal to defeat the armed forces of the old order. But this generalization, however apt, requires further specification. What China shows is that British capital’s decision to back reaction against revolution is, in large part, what made for the success of Yuan Shikai’s northern military forces. The families and forces of the old order fought ferociously to defeat the agenda of national inclusion and human progress of the southern revolutionaries in the era during which the 1911 revolution exploded. In China and elsewhere, the threatened and vengeful forces of the old order crushed all of these pre-WWI democratic revolutions aided by the wealth of international finance, especially British capital.

When democracy was defeated after the 1911 revolution in China and in the other revolutions discussed in Kurzman’s book, when most of the remaining old order monarchies then imploded during the costly blood-letting of WWI, a new age arose. Liberal democrats were squeezed out. The new age pit fascists against Leninist Bolsheviks who promoted a state-run command economy. The racist and militaristic fascists subsequently were largely de-legitimated during WWII; the command economy Leninist Bolsheviks of Stalin and his epigone basically lost out in China in 1979 when Deng Xiaoping opened China to the dynamism of the world market and abandoned governmental preferences of minimizing tourism, trade, international study, technology borrowing, foreign investment, etc.

Our age therefore is far different from the pre-WWI clash of democrats with the ancien regime. China in 2011 is no longer vulnerable to the power of British capital. Instead, China is an international financial powerhouse. It is what Britain once was.

In addition, the social forces at work today are totally different. In 1911, most people lived in agrarian villages in states that were divine monarchies. Today, people tend to be urban. They live in secular nation states. Back then, scarce British gold was valuable. In today’s global finance, capital is cheap and abundant. Back then “the sun never set on the British empire.” Today, OPEC and the E-7 (China, India, Brazil, etc.) pile up foreign exchange. In general, theories of revolution tend only to apply for a time-limited historical era because the most powerful shaping forces fundamentally change over time.

This is not to say that no post WWI event is usefully comparable to the experience of China’s 1911 revolution. As already mentioned, the fate of Allende in Chile in 1973 seems strikingly similar to what happened to Sun Yat-sen and his state socialist allies in 1913. In Chile too a revolutionary socialist was swiftly ousted from power in an age where, in this case, the U.S.A. had the capital to play the role that British capital played in 1913 in helping the anti-democratic forces of reaction. In Chiles’s case, the Pinochet military temporarily defeated socialist revolution. Pinochet, as Yuan Shikai, presented himself as representing the true essence of the nation which was opposed to alien socialist ways.

The comparative method clarifies. CCP political philosopher Ai Siqi in 1940 rejected the rationalizations of Chiang Kai-shek’s fascist-tending apologists for a uniquely Chinese proto-fascist dictatorship. Wrote Ai, “All reactionary thought in contemporary China is of the same tradition—it emphasizes China’s ‘national characteristics’; harps on China’s ‘special nature,’ and wipes aside the general principles of humanity, arguing that China’s social development can only follow China’s own path.” Chiang Kai-shek had argued in China’s Destiny in 1940 that universals such as “liberalism and communism” were “fundamentally incompatible with the psychology and disposition of our nation.”

There, of course, is nothing peculiarly Chinese about a regime legitimating its control of state power by inventing appeals to cultural particulars. The BJP in India has promoted Hindu math. Suharto in Indonesia flitted from East Asian values to Islamist ones to legitimate his monopoly of political power, a discourse which helped rationalize and mobilize monstrous attacks on people of Chinese descent when Suharto fell. Certain groups in Malaysia have courted rural Muslim voters by invoking so-called Bumiputra values in order to discredit Malays of Chinese descent as alien. As Han Han asked, “… there may be different values between earthlings and aliens. But for Westerners and Easterners?” The globe is round. Culture travels.

This is not to deny that Chinese political history, as the history of all major nations, is also autochthenous. After the Yuan coup, when Sun fled to exile in Japan, Sun concluded both that the forces of the old order could be defeated only by the unified power of a single party dictatorship and also that the fighters on behalf of such a party would have to come from the uprooted rural poor, as with the social bandit known as the White Wolf, to whom Sun reached out. Sun also concluded that only an anti-imperialist ideology could persuade and win over educated Chinese to sacrifice for this political strategy and this political alliance as a way to make China wealthy and strong so it could assume its proper place in the family of nations. These tendencies and choices, which preceded the Bolshevik Revolution and already presaged the subsequent rise of the CCP, are detailed in my 1974 University of California Press book on Sun’s Chinese Revolutionary Party, Backward Toward Revolution.

But Sun’s actions were not uniquely Chinese choices. Similar choices were made by Tito, Hoxha, Castro, Pol Pot, Comrade Gonzalo, etcetera. These commitments reflect the forces and possibilities of an era running from around 1914 to 1989 all around our ever smaller globe. All the possibilities are alive in every great culture. Great powers influence and shape political choices for other governments. Events in world power China help shape and re-shape choices for peoples everywhere.

**International Forces in the 1911 Revolution**

The revolutionary socialists who took power in Guangzhou in the wake of the 1911 revolution defined, for conservative forces, why the revolution had to be defeated at any price. As at the national center and in all the other provinces, it was difficult in Guangdong to raise taxes to pay for security and development because officials were seen as corrupt and self-serving. People of means in the provincial assemblies would not readily vote for new taxes. To survive and prosper, therefore, the CRA government of Hu Hanmin in Guangzhou would seek loans from British, Japanese and American banks. The people with the capital were the pipers who called the political tunes. There seemed no alternative. The American Consul in Guangzhou noted that most “disturbances in China are the result of oppressive exactions in the way of taxes, duties and the like.” Consequently, the military history of political struggles in post-1911 China was informed by the power of foreign finance to offer a substitute for military funding that was hard to come by domestically.

The Wuhan uprising on October 10, 1911 swiftly took as its leader a military man, Li Yuanhong. Li had no love for the republican revolutionaries. He unleashed security forces against them. The earlier call of Zou Rong’s revolutionary pamphlet for China’s sons to become George Washingtons so that the liberty bell could ring out over China was answered by racialized anti-Manchu patriots. Liberal constitutionalists could not stand against the combined weight of vested interests, the need of the marginalized for the means of immediate survival, and foreign capital.

The April 27, 1911 Guangzhou uprising, before the Double Ten rebellion in Wuhan, had exposed the mortal vulnerability of the ancien regime. The uprising had been preceded by an assassination attempt on a Manchu naval officer. The would-be assassin told his captors, “I listened to the lectures of Dr. Sun Wen and joined his society [the Chinese Revolutionary Alliance]. His lectures were on the subject of revolution and the overthrow of the present dynasty.” Modern-minded gentry saw a parliamentary republic as a means to seize control of finances and taxes from the bankrupt Manchu empire, understood as a dying regime suffering forced indemnities brought on from defeat by the Meiji Empire in a war in and around Korea and by the international intervention against the Boxer rioters to which the monarchy had been friendly.

After the April 27 revolt, Viceroy Zhang Mingqi, stationed in Guangzhou, ordered a search of houses to seize arms caches. But the regime had become so narrowly self-serving that its attempts to preserve its power instead alienated even people among its base of power. The searches became excuses for plunder and theft. Women were molested. Street fights broke out. The search order had to be rescinded.

In August 1911 the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bankeng Corporation, the most powerful financial institution in south China, a bank whose notes circulated in Guangdong, reported:

That a large part of its $9,000,000 bond note issue was being held instead of circulated by the Chinese of Guangdong and other southern provinces. This hoarding of safe securities always indicates a lack of faith as to the business and political future.

Business stagnated. Money flowed to foreign banks. Nonetheless, the revolutionaries did not see merchants as natural allies but rather as a dependent stratum which would go with the side of strength able to deliver conditions facilitating profitable commerce. 1911 was not a bourgeois revolution, a fact detailed in Kurzman’s book.

For both the revolutionaries and the regime, the loyalty of the military was central. It always is in revolutionary situations, as Kurzman points out. For the Guangzhou region, the heads of the major armed forces, long courted by the revolutionaries, would not fight for the monarchy after October 10. Viceroy Zhang fled, saying, “The navy and army united in support of the people. All hope [for the monarchy] was gone.” Repression would have had to target the modern-minded children of elite families. What the fleeing Viceroy preferred was “the right man in the right place,” strong man government. In general, what the old elites, who momentarily and opportunistically cooperated with the revolutionaries in 1911, most wanted was to preserve their base of power and wealth.

Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionary socialists struggled for a very different future. The clash in Guangzhou between revolutionary socialists and entrenched elites was real and deep and of large national significance. For the reactionary north of Yuan, behavior in the socialist south threatened him and China.

As students of republican governance, Chinese intellectuals found that parliament became sovereign in Britain by gaining control of the taxing power, that the American republic was made possible by a struggle against “taxation without representation,” that the French monarchy undermined the old aristocratic order when it summoned the third estate to vote the king more tax money. Influential public intellectual Yan Fu had learned and taught fellow Chinese that parliament traced back “to its tax-paying function...it is precisely here that we must seek the basis of the growth of popular rights...” Liang Qichao agreed that “if history taught anything, it was that representative government originated from tax problems.” In general, social theorist Barrington Moore, in studying revolutions, concluded that financial crises that facilitated regimes of ordered liberty in France, England and America were unique to states which were too weak to meet the tax challenge of the high cost of modernity.

But international capital in the early 20th century could artificially inflate reactionary state power by offering a substitute for concessions to taxpayers and thereby suffocate liberal forces. Moore ignores international factors. He does not see how Chinese state capacity had waned. This may have offered democrats a window of opportunity in 1911 as China was more like Europe. But British finance capital could tilt the scales of power for Yuan and against the southern progressives. Taxes, or a substitute for taxes, really mattered.

On October 25, 1911, to try to silence the angry thunder of the revolutionaries, the Guangdong government ended tax payments to the monarchy. When Sun Yat-sen issued his first manifesto in Nanjing as Provisional President and listed grievances against the ancien regime, the first was that “They have levied irregular and unwholesome taxes upon us without our consent.” Yuan Shikai was warned by the republicans that if he, Yuan, moved against the republic, he would meet the fate of Louis XVI, the monarch executed in the French revolution. To win in the contest between reaction and revolution, north and south, Yuan and Sun, required other sources of funding than taxes to buy a strong military as an alternative to alienating local vested interests.

When young CRA modernizers took power in Guangzhou in the aftermath of the 1911 revolution, it was like the success of a national liberation struggle putting in power patriotic modernizers. Prospects for liberal constitutionalist success seemed propitious. After all, the conservative right could not yet imagine a fascist alternative and the Bolshevik Revolution had not yet occurred. There was no expropriating left to frighten landed wealth and commerce. The choice seemed simple. If one was not a monarchist, one was a republican. As mentioned above, after the First World War, the menu of political choices changed and became fascist versus Bolshevik.

Adding to the advantageous circumstances of 1911, Guangzhou had an unusually high number of young people who had received modern educations at home or abroad. They wanted to press ahead with lifesaving reforms in health-care and life-enhancing reforms in education and life-affirming reforms for women. A Sanitation Board was established in December 1911 run by a graduate of Edinburgh. Doctors were assigned to the military whose soldiers were taught to wash daily. The Board made vaccinations against small-pox, administered at police stations, compulsory and free. Disinfectants were applied to homes after someone died. Garbage receptacles were placed on street corners. When cases of the plague were reported, quarantines were imposed. War was declared on rats.

But everything costs money. Funds, however, were lacking for an isolation hospital. By July 1912, a lack of revenue led to an abolition of the Sanitation Board. The police took over. Its budget and responsibilities kept expanding. Coffin-makers were ordered to report deaths and causes of death so the police could act to keep disease from spreading. The coffin-makers went on strike. The Chamber of Commerce complained to Governor Hu Hanmin about police arresting non-compliant merchants. The police chief responded,

We are not Manchus, but Chinese...of Guangdong. One would think that you imagine that you can drive us out as the Manchus were driven out, or that you were trying to foment a counter-revolution....

Although the executive branch won on collecting morbidity statistics, even these small reforms alienated vested interests. Social reform was not their agenda.

Governor Hu decreed an end to slavery. The police were ordered to free slave girls. A home was established for the freed girls. It soon over-flowed with 500 plus residents who were taught to read, play music, and learn a job skill. But wealthy families complained about the police barging in to their homes to free “slave girls,” insisting this was legal bonded labor. To Chinese wealth, the reform regime looked like brain-washed Christians turning against authentic Chinese, an experience probably not lessened by the “rescue” of slaves from Buddhist nunneries. Social justice was damned as alien ways.

Kang Yuwei noted that these socialists “degraded the gentry so severely that even the sign boards jinshi and zhuren were torn down.” When the CRA government in Guangzhou abolished old titles, rage exploded in the countryside and furious mobs destroyed ancestral temples and tablets of wealthy families.

Reforms were broad, everything from prisons to beggars. Parks, playgrounds, and homes for the aged and for orphans were erected. The government adopted the solar calendar and received payments by quarters of the solar year. But the beneficiaries of social justice were previously powerless people. Those of wealth, whose money funded the government, did not see themselves as receiving any benefits. They were alienated by the seemingly alien reform government.

The new Commissioner of Education had, in fact, been president of the YMCA since its 1908 founding and later served as Dean of Canton Christian College. At the provincial education conference in August 1912, the College put on a play promoting education whose hero was a Chinese Christian educated in the USA. Speakers were sent out to attack superstition, idolatry, gambling, opium smoking, and enslaving girls. Mission schools and missionaries proliferated. The popular image was “that all the officials were Christians,” in a region where, but a few years earlier, merely helping a Christian missionary could lead to 500 lashes.

The Education Commission ended religious education, meaning a stoppage to Confucian education. In some places, Confucian temples were converted to schools. The old elites saw a Chinese ethos replaced by an alien Christian one.

Merchants and others demanded that Governor Hu repair Confucian temples. They opposed his proposal for universal education and were backed by many poor families who wanted the earnings of their little children. By November 1912 the government could not fund its educational reforms. The merchants would approve no new taxes.

Women’s rights were experienced as a radical issue. Whereas the CRA granted seats to women in the Guangdong provincial assembly in December 1911, proudly believing it “was the first time Asia has seen women as members of parliament,” Song Jiaoren’s national KMT, a far more conservative party than the CRA in Guangdong, would not allow such a plank as equal gender rights in its political platform. Indeed, women, as in most democratic countries in 1912, were not allowed to vote in the national parliamentary elections. By February 1913, this right was lost in Guangzhou too. The societal tide was against the advanced ideas of the revolution even in Guangdong. The revolutionaries also backed off from their attempt to make prostitution illegal. At the height of reform fervor on behalf of gender equality, a procuress or adulterer could be executed. The well-to-do were not impressed by the “un-Chinese” changes, by seemingly foreign mores.

Rules promoting gender equality were cancelled. Women and men would have to sit separately in theaters. Libraries would be open to men and women on different days. The Provincial Assembly would not even allow co-education classrooms before age 11. Some women’s schools were closed.

Rumors spread about alleged immoral conduct by women members of the Assembly. Confucians, conservatives and conventional morality strongly opposed so-called alien ways, portrayed as hurting women.

Hardly a day passes but a paper reports some married woman with a paramour, and there is a general outcry against the breaking-down of the stricter barriers which have hitherto guarded the weaker sex in China.

Publicly active women felt they had to flee for their lives when the parliamentary government was toppled in 1913 and the conservatives came to power under the banner of Confucius or returning to time-tested Chinese ways.

And yet, for nation-building, before WWI and its outcome of bi-polar authoritarian alternatives, the modern-minded believed that only parliamentary elections could unite the nation and build a strong state, as in England. Key works on parliamentary practice had been translated into Chinese. These modern-minded people knew how to run and win the parliamentary elections that began in late 1912. But, according to an American envoy, “the merchants were generally more conservative...and preferred the continuance of the old order.” That is, business and landed elites would not accept the results of the ballot in 1913 which was felt as based on the rural poor. Pretty much as described in Barrington Moore Jr., Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy, frightened yet relatively weak urban commercial interests preferred to rely on strong, conservative landed elites rather than on modern urban intellectuals appealing to the poor, seen by commercial wealth as too radical and unrealistic, not respectful of imperatives such as sound money, low taxes and order.

To be sure, Chinese provinces and regions differed. Enlightened gentry who had most successfully challenged British opium interests in Jiangxi, Hunan and Zhejiang led successful provincial assemblies. But in Guangdong, the core of the CRA base, the modern patriots had a hard time standing against entrenched wealth and power. It would be far more difficult for such modern forces most everywhere else in China. It was an omen of the future that Guangzhou merchants trusted CRA leader Wang Jingwei more because he was seen as a friend of the personal and political family of northern strongman Yuan Shikai. To court wealth, Sun Yat-sen disassociated himself from “the ignorant people who misunderstand equality and liberty.”

Sun felt trapped by socio-economic forces, noting that “even if Confucius were reborn under present conditions, there necessarily would be people who would deny him.” Sun would sacrifice power for young revolutionaries in order to court conservative financial interests, a deal which could re-ignite the economy. But Cantonese vested interests were not pro Sun or pro Hu. They also saw the Yuan Shikai group as including well-educated Cantonese in “influential and lucrative posts,” such as Liang Shiyi. They would choose those conservative Cantonese over Sun’s socialist reformers.

The socialist revolutionaries’ commitment to constitutional governance turned out to be rather weak. One consequence of seeing China in a European mirror was the notion that democracy was the fruit of a bourgeois revolution in which the landed gentry waned and the urban merchants rose. There was a European tradition running from the cautious Constant to the radical Marx that parliamentary democracy meant bourgeois dictatorship.

The revolutionary government in bankrupt Guangzhou headed by Hu Hanmin soon sought a short term military dictatorship to carry out social reform. Hu’s government, made up largely of teachers, journalists and other modern professionals and cultural workers, was not beloved by the elites of wealth and status. The elites would fund security forces to restore order, not social reform. But overseas Chinese money allowed Hu Hanmin, for a very short while, to fund a somewhat strong military force. The upshot, according to a rich merchant who fled, was vengeful rule that would “persecute and despoil families of honor.”

Few doubted the paramount importance of the financial issue. The consensus was that a huge foreign loan was needed. On December 22, 1911, Sun Yat-sen contended,

All the provinces were greatly in need of money...the remedy could only be found in borrowing from foreign sources, he could obtain as much money as he wanted at 4 percent interest...the Manchus were not trusted by the foreigners…Yuan Shikai sought to borrow 50,000 from France and Belgium but he [Sun] sent a telegram to Belgium saying that the people of China would not recognize the loan and would not...respect it. As a result, the scheme fell through.

Constrained by the high cost of security and inadequate taxes, Hu Hanmin would raise some money from merchants to pay the troops. But what the merchants wanted was an army of their own, a Cantonese Li Yuanhong.

In Guangzhou, “The powers that be in Canton...known as the ‘Seventy-two Guilds and the Nine Charitable Institutions’ devised a plan to throw off the revolutionist army.” To the merchants, it was obvious by 1912 that weapons were trumps. Hence they used their wealth to purchase the loyalty of the local military. But in 1912 in Guangzhou, it was the military of the CRA that temporarily triumphed. Forces loyal to the merchants or to the monarchy still waited in the wings. CRA security forces went house to house in a search for weapons and for members of the Protect the Emperor Society, with its spokesman Liang Qichao pilloried for supposedly trying to raise a Russia Tsarist army to smite the republicans. People, especially military leaders loyal to Kang Yuwei were shot in Guangdong. Liang’s property was confiscated. Revolution was not a dinner party.

People of wealth fled, courted the northern army in Beijing, and worked against the revolutionaries in Guangzhou. Some abandoned support for the CRA and threw their lot in with General Li Yuaghong in Wuhan.

Sun Yat-sen tried to stop what was portrayed as revolutionary terror. But politics had polarized. Money, not liking its tax burden or the government printing cheap money, was joining with the military against the CRA, soon to be reorganized as the KMT. But uniquely in China, for another year, until June 1913, Albert Maybon found in his 1914 study of “La Republique Chinoise,” “Canton belonged exclusively...to the Chinese Revolutionary Alliance.” Contradictorily, and the contradiction was not imaginary, Maybon also found that “The merchant class at Canton is the only one that really matters; by its work and wealth, it acts as the virtual force of the city.” It did not embrace socialist revolution.

Imagining the Manchu monarchy as having sold China out to foreign imperialism, the southern nationalists who had been working to topple the Manchus and vest power in the Han were sensitive Chinese nationalists. In Guangzhou, their supporters included people who had fought the French in Vietnam and the Japanese in Taiwan. They responded fiercely to reports of British warships on the West River or rumors of a Chinese maid raped by a foreign employer. An international journalist noted, “The foreigner today is no favorite. The victorious rebels have become haughty.” The southern revolutionaries were proud Chinese patriots.

The Hu Hanmin government in Guangzhou wanted to promote Chinese pride and sovereignty. It presented itself as the friend of Chinese merchants. Hu urged people who dressed in European attire to use Chinese manufacturers. The government promoted import substitution industry, for example, by establishing a hat factory to make hats that had been previously imported. Soldiers pledged to smoke Chinese tobacco and drink Chinese alcohol. Merchants welcomed the promotion of Chinese products.

The north however, opposed the effort to “use native products” and boycott foreign goods. The British noted that “The idea of ‘China for the Chinese’ would seem to be gaining ground ...to keep in their own control the farms, railways and other enterprises of China.” In truth, the late Qing rulers had already begun a rights recovery movement. Economic nationalism was popular across the political spectrum. All were patriots.

The British broke relations with the Guangzhou government because of “the truculent attitude which the Southern Chinese have adopted toward foreigners since the Revolution.” That is, the British refused to hand over, as the law required, a Chinese who had slapped a foreigner in a foreign place of employment. The British insisted they were acting on humanitarian grounds, supposedly fearing the Chinese would execute the accused. The British flogged and jailed him. In contrast, the republican government had banned flogging as barbaric. A Chinese boycott erupted against the foreign firm. The Chinese prisoner was then released. When the American-trained head of foreign affairs in Guangzhou formally complained about Britain’s disregard of treaties, the British broke relations. Eventually, the British, again, had to back down.

This patriotism arose in the late Qing. It was already manifest in the history of the Canton Cement Works (CCW). It was inaugurated to compete with the Green Island Cement Works (GICW) in Hong Kong, whose officers and shareholders seemed a virtual Who’s Who of Hong Kong and Macau. The late Qing government tried to regulate the Feishu limestone quarry to benefit CCW. 1910 had been a depression year. The Hu Hanmin government, after the 1911 revolution, wanted the CCW to prosper and help fund his government and its reforms. Hu’s view was that the state should be for “socialism against the monopolization of wealth by a minority.” With state industries, “the State will be able to invest capital in productive enterprises in the interest of the community....” Post 1911 revolution Guangzhou would enforce Qing rules against blue limestone exports to the GICC which the corrupt Qing had not. As a result, the value of GICC stock plummeted.

That would change in 1913 when the revolutionaries were toppled. As Hu Hanmin put it,

Whenever men of the revolutionary party took power, there the foreigners didn’t dare to lightly intervene...Guangtong strictly forbade the export of cement [limestone]. It was a great blow to the British. The British Minister worked hard at Peking but couldn’t get anywhere.... But with the loss of the second revolution [the failure to save the revolution by defeating the 1913 military coup], Mr. Yuan Shikai then made a gift of the Feishu quarries to the British...only our party could use genuine popular support to defend the nation...a revolution is needed for our [China’s] salvation.

The new acting governor in Guangzhou after Hu Hanmin, Chen Jiongming, in removing opponents, killed officers in independent militaries, closed newspapers, executed a newspaper editor, and lost the support of the Provincial Assembly. But merchants preferred order at almost any cost, praising the execution of the newspaper editor. Sun Yat-sen went to Guangzhou on April 27 and criticized the press in a Leninist way for picking on the government.

Under a dictatorship, newspapers could use the method of attack because the government is not the people’s government. But under a republic, newspapers should not use the method of attack because the government is the people’s government.

Sun worriedly announced,

Let the editors of the south be reminded that...if...there should be trouble in the south...then the north will surely march southwards....

Democracy for the moment was less important than defeating reactionaries who were neither democratic nor progressive.

Sun Yat-sen, finding his land tax schemes had come to nothing and seeing the Assembly unwilling to fund the Governor’s program began to fantasize a need to seize all power for the side of justice. Meanwhile, paper money was cranked out to pay unpaid soldiers. Rumors spread about land confiscation or high land taxes. Merchants and landowners therefore coalesced against the revolution, while the Assembly stymied the Governor’s fiscal schemes. Wealth would not tax itself to fund socialist projects. Nor would the British Government help Governor Hu raise foreign funds. In general, all over the world, the British tended to back conservative forces friendly to British finance. In China they wanted Yuan Shikai in control. Yuan turned to the British, saying,

That as the state of things in Canton was so desperate, the only course open was to ask for foreign intervention and to get the Canton Province run as say the customs are run [by the British] for a limited period of twenty or thirty years.

The north and the south tried to outbid each other for foreign support. Guangzhou’s Governor Hu had turned to American finance for a bank loan. But President Yuan seems to have been able to block it. With the help of foreign loans, Yuan found ways of undermining Guangzhou efforts to fund reforms. When Hu Hanmin resisted, Yuan’s government in June 1913 forced him out of office. The struggle between the conservative center and the progressive provinces had become a struggle “for control of the public purse.” The British threw their weight against the progressive reformers’ attempt to raise funds.

Local money seemed risky. Those with wealth and commerce wanted a government that would not create such risks. They looked to Yuan Shikai as a savior.

The British agreed with Yuan. In Wuhan as in Guangzhou, the rise of Yuan and the end to elected legislatures meant an end to Chinese patriots promoting China’s sovereign rights. An American diplomat similarly saw post-1911 revolutionary democracy as empowering patriots who insisted on “China for the Chinese.” To this foreign commentator, Chinese weren’t suited for democracy.

They are wholly unfitted for such a government.... Apart from the tyrannical attitude of the old government, which will never be otherwise so long as a Chinaman is in control, the Manchu system was the right one for the Chinese. The Central idea of Government with the iron heel of authority seems the best suited for the difficult Chinese.

To Britain, concerned both with its own economic interests and also with checking the interests of other great powers, the southern progressives stood for “rights recovery in matters of foreign policy” rather than for an economy open to British interests. In contrast, the northern conservative interests around Yuan Shikai “curbed the much too buoyant and bellicose representatives of ‘Young China’ and the swaggers of the claptrap phrase ‘China for the Chinese’.”

In March 1913 Yuan Shikai’s Cantonese secretary, Liang Shiyi, visited Governor Hu and offered to bail out Guangzhou financially if the Governor would abandon the reform agenda Liang said,

...in Canton...the officials have gone too fast...foreign ways of government cannot be adapted in a day... [Canton should] raise more salt revenue as well as stamp duties.... The question of maintaining the value of the paper currency is very important....

The reforms cost money, lost revenue, and frightened wealth. Efforts to build schools, widen roads, modernize drainage, and enhance market efficiency ground to a halt by 1913 because of a lack of funds. The Assembly would not vote new monies for reforms that gentry and merchant members rejected. Alternatives were therefore sought to a winner-take-all notion of parliamentary politics.

The two sides could not concur on the rules of the political game. Democracy is a peace pact, an agreement among elites and challengers to play the game of politics by a negotiated set of rules. The eight-point program of September 25, 1912 between Yuan in the north, Sun in the south, and Li Yuanhong and Huang Xing in both the heart of the Yangtze and in its delta region seemed such an agreement. They agreed to “mediating party differences.” Yuan would not accept rule by the National Party. His challengers therefore conceded to a coalition government to preserve China’s sovereign integrity. Huang Xing agreed that China should not be “using a party to create a government.”

Kang Yuwei, as Yuan, took Germany (and Japan) as models. Power should be vested in a strong centralized administration where the chief executive neither devolved power nor put power up to a popular vote. Bismarck, after all, had held office for twenty years. But in Guangzhou, Yuan looked more like a Napoleon or a Cromwell, a cruel tyrant and not a bringer of rapid industrial growth.

In the nation-wide election campaign of 1912 and 1913, the Republican Party and then the Progressive Party of Liang Qichao tried to organize pro-administration forces based on vertical ties heading down from Beijing. Song Jiaoren’s KMT, in contrast, worked out of Shanghai to mobilize societal forces up and down the Yangtze Valley. Neither Liang nor Sun Yat-sen was comfortable with the open clash of diverse interests. Liang tended toward Enlightened Despotism utilizing “all the renowned people in the nation,” with Sun, as Yuan Shikai, preferring a strong executive unencumbered by obstacles to doing the right thing.

It would be hard to argue that the Hu Hanmin government in Canton honored democracy when it suspended newspapers which printed stories that embarrassed his party. The goal of all was to make China wealthy and strong rapidly. At one point, Sun Yat-sen and Huang Xing tried to join with Yuan to end party conflict and create a grand coalition of all parties. Foreign threats (Russia supporting an independent Mongolia) and national humiliation (the terms of foreign loans) produced a crisis atmosphere in which unity and sacrifice seemed legitimate to most politically conscious Chinese. In Yuan’s Beijing as well as in Hu Hanmin’s Guangdong, executive orders were issued without any legislative debate or vote.

Whereas Sun had sought a deal with Yuan and Li to end political conflict and speed China’s industrial development, Song Jiaoren and his KMT supporters promoted an open politics of peaceful conflict resulting in power in the parliamentary hands of a responsible party cabinet; a party, however, which had abandoned the CRA radical agenda of equal rights for women and equalizing land rights. Sun now thought that equal rights for women could wait until women were educated. He stayed silent when his colleagues abandoned socialism, apparently well-understanding the dangers inherent in provoking vested interests.

Wealth conspired with the military and plotted against Governor Hu. Plotters were arrested and shot by the second half of 1912. Hu then slowed reform and tried to make a deal with President Yuan. To the British Foreign Office, “The crux of the whole position is the terrible lack of money.” Merchants in the Assembly grew more powerful.

Yuan’s side slammed the KMT mobilization of interests. “These were combinations of men with influence who joined themselves together so that they might further their own aims and ensure the election of their own candidates.” Yuan was seen by many of his supporters as a modern reformer with a record of achievement on issues ranging from prison reform to metropolitan administration. Nonetheless, even in his bailiwick, Yuan was understood by merchants and enlightened gentry to be a balancer of vested interests selfishly hanging on to power with no dynamic project for a better Chinese future.

The KMT swept the elections. But the debates in the parliament could not change national policy. Liang Qichao saw “the calamity of government by the mob,” meaning the southern socialist-oriented revolutionaries. He tried to organize other parties to join together to oppose “the mob” and instead to back the “bureaucratic faction.” In the lower house, their tactics paralyzed the legislature. But for Liang it was the only way “to prevent aggression from outside,” territorial integrity being “the chief object of the nation.” The anti-KMT forces which backed Yuan’s northern military won control of the lower house. A struggle to divide the spoils ensued. The momentary and fragile grand coalition split.

An associate of Liang concluded,

The parliament is really a menace to the country. Its members cast their vote as they are ordered to do…the Chinese people regard the Parliament as a useless thing, and they would perhaps not be displeased if the Government were to follow the example of Cromwell and suppress it by military force.

While believing that “without a strong parliament a stable Republic is not possible,” Sun’s constitutionalists agreed,

It is an open secret that the country is disappointed with the Parliament. The weakness and irreconcilable, not to say inflammatory, opposition of its various constituents towards each other have been contributing to the present national impasse.

A broad array of forces, including CRA leaders, disapproved of KMT electoral leader Song going to a popular electorate to count voters instead of making a deal among elites of all parties. Song would be given a sinecure as ambassador to Japan. Huang Xing preferred that the major parties cooperate. But Liang Qichao rejected the proposal for a grand coalition, hoping instead to be invited “to organize the first camlet.”

Huang Xing’s hope for a National Party cabinet to cooperate with Yuan was rejected by Yuan’s lieutenants. They would not trust a party cabinet. Huang was forced out as head of the Canton-Hankow Railroad. In the national election campaign, Yuan’s people funded opponents of Sung and Huang threw Song his support. Yuan’s side wanted the power to appoint provincial governors whereas the KMT wanted them popularly elected. Yuan’s northern conservatives had no interest in conceding power. Yuan, in December 1912, appointed the governor in Jiangxi, a KMT stronghold.

The opposing groups also debated how to stop Mongolia from gaining independence with Russian backing. Yuan saw the southern forces as new Boxers, the out-of-touch and enraged who would produce a war with foreign armies which would humiliate and weaken China. Analysts saw the southern attempt to raise an army to march north under the banner of nationalism as aimed at toppling Yuan. His aides saw Yuan’s anger at Song’s views on Mongolia as equal to an order that Song be killed.

According to the American Consul in Shanghai on May 8, 1913, Sun Yat-sen said that even if civil war in China allowed Russia to protect Mongolia and allowed Japan to dominate Manchuria, “that was not all of China, that he regarded what was left as the true China.” To Yuan’s supporters, democracy would dismember China.

By January 1913, Yuan acted in disregard of the new constitution. The KMT would try to move the capital to Nanjing and win military support from non-Beiyang forces in the Yangzi Valley area. Conversations were soon underway between Beijing and Shanghai to eliminate Song as preferable to turning over administrative power to a Song cabinet. Zhili Governor-General Feng Guozhang, a commander of part of the Beiyang military, in January, declared that moving the capital to Nanjing would be treason. A Huang Xing presidency would be treated as a declaration of “civil war between North and South.” Yuan’s supporters in the northern military and the national administration would not permit a transfer of power to Song, Huang, the KMT, the South or Nanjing. They would not surrender control of ministries that oversaw the military, transportation, banking, loans, taxes, etc.

As proof that the north was on the side of normal efficiency and good government, the Yuan administration cited the work of American political scientist Frank Goodnow who claimed that the real purposes of popular control are met in unitary states such as France and Russia where local officials are appointed by the center rather than being elected. The south responded, “The time has gone when one man rule was the fashion.”

But to the powers and international bankers, Yuan was “the Strong Man of China” who would crush “southern political visionaries.” The British legation in Beijing reported,

Parliament has only confirmed the incapacity of the Chinese people for self-government on any other than a patriarchal basis. It is with the idea of strengthening his rule on this established basis...that the President is toying with the idea of Confucianism as a state religion.

Parties split. The premier-in waiting, Song Jiaoren, was assassinated. Yet after Yuan got his big foreign loan, virtually no one was willing to fight him. Even those who rose up against Yuan in July 1913 knew their parliamentary republic was a lost cause. The British Foreign Office concluded, “Any domestic dispute in China must be financed and armed from abroad....” Yuan’s and Sun’s behavior suggest they concurred with this assessment. Yuan would hold power by selling out Chinese interests to the British and Sun Yat-sen by selling out Chinese territory to Japan.

Li Yuanhong in Wuhan saw the KMT as in cahoots with Japan such that it would make concessions to Japan, maybe of Manchuria and Fujian. That is, the Nationalist Party did not seem very nationalistic to others in its attempted mobilization in 1913 against Yuan Shikai for selling out China to a banking coalition led by Britain. Most agreed that China needed a big loan.

To themselves, Sun and his party were modern patriots committed to “equal rights with men being given to women” and to socialism, albeit without property expropriation. To Jiang Kanghu, the head of the Socialist Party, Sun was a Bismarctian state-builder and social reformer. What Sun called state socialism was meant to avoid the evil of hugely wealthy capitalists. Of course, as people all over the world and across the political spectrum in this racialized Social Davoinist era, Sun saw in a racial manner. Mongols and Tibetans should be subordinated in China as “Negroes in the Southern States of America.”

This racism did not make the CRA appear any less to be “confirmed foes of the privileges of the rich.” A British newspaper editorialized on March 22, 1913, “there is certainly no call for any extension of Socialist influences…which, as seen in Canton, have already occasioned no small scandal among respectable Chinese.” When Yuan Shikai disbanded the new KMT in 1913, the National Party which had succeeded the CRA, Yuan announced, “The National Party is a socialist party and its members are criminals.”

The condition for the huge loan to save Yuan Shikai’s northern forces was British supervision. Patriotic opposition to such loan conditionality, however, was not something Yuan Shikai could go against. Politically-conscious Chinese saw how British loans to Egypt led to British control of Egyptian finance and then to Egypt becoming a colony of Britain’s. Patriots all, no Chinese wished China to become a British colony.

In response to Chinese outrage, British bankers softened their terms. American bankers wanted a quick signing of a loan to get the profitable crumbs of the British deal before Woodrow Wilson, seen as too friendly to democracy, became American president in January 1913. Nonetheless, the popular opposition in China was strong enough and the loan terms harsh enough that Yuan’s government temporarily broke off talks with the international banking consortium in March 1913.

Yuan may have hoped for help from Kaiser Wilhelm’s Germany. Yuan saw himself as Bismarck. His army, the Beiyang, a number of whose officers had studied in Germany saw their Beiyang army as similar to the Junkers in Prussia.

To survive, Yuan needed to stand up to foreign inroads, to Britain in Tibet, Russia in Mongolia, Japan in Manchuria, and France in Sichuan/Yunnan. Democracy claimed to strengthen true Chinese independence. Yuan feared that if he caved in to the loan conditions, then his progressive, patriotic opponents would be empowered and emboldened. With US President Wilson pulling out of the colonialist loan consortium by March 1913, it looked like the British-led bloc would have to remove from the loans the conditions which most palpably threatened China’s sovereignty.

And then Song Jiaoren, the leader of the parliamentary majority was shot. To some, the assassination was meant to block Song winning over Li Yuanhong and the military in the Yangzi Valley. Civil war seemed to threaten. Foreign interest in the loan rapidly waned. China seemed too risky. Yuan then dispatched troops south and signed a secret loan with Germany on April 5 that included the old, obnoxious terms.

When Song was assassinated, documents were found which linked the assassin to Yuan’s Prime Minister and to some of Yuan’s closest associates. [[2]](#footnote-2) The Nationalists believed this disclosure would compel Yuan to resign and allow the entrenchment of the parliamentary revolution. Yuan instead turned to the British and the consortium it led for money. The Germans added more funds. Yuan would be a “strong man.” The powers preferred a dictator to democracy. The dictator would deliver stability and unity and strength. The U.S. representative in Nanjing rationalized support for the tyrant, insisting that the 1911 revolution was not a response to tyranny.

The main cause…was that they saw China despised and encroached upon by foreign nations. The moving principle...was to put their country into a position to resist the foreigners....

The representatives of these powers told the parliamentarians that “representative government in China...is a sheer impossibility.” As the British representative put it, “China is quite unsuited for representative government.” The loan allowed Yuan to arm to defeat the republicans. The British chose between “Yuan Shikai and the South.”

The loan would pay the army and satisfy purchasers of government bonds and keep the provinces loyal and pay-off and disband dissident troops. An American businessman noted, “these military autocrats [have] made impossible the success of parliamentary government...the sympathy of the Western democracies has been extended to the enemies of free government....” Huang Xing agreed, “the deplorable conditions...have been made possible by the...financial aid which Yuan Shikai received from Europe.” The play of forces suggests that British finance was a major factor in defeating Chinese democracy in 1913.

**Overall Assessments**

There is no way to measure precisely how weighty a factor was the thumb on the scales of Chinese power by which the leading world power, Britain, pressed for the north against the south with British financial might. Domestic forces usually are more significant than external ones. But in an era of globalized finance dominated by Britain, an era in which raising taxes in China for military security and economic development was so difficult that no government thought it could survive and prosper without large foreign loans, in an international order without helpful international aid organizations, without a World Bank, U.N. Development Program or Asian Development Bank, foreign finance insinuated itself heavily inside of domestic Chinese politics.

An American missionary, impressed by the achievements of the southern progressives, feared they would not survive “unless the foreign powers who are in sympathy with the ambitions of these people to establish a popular form of government can find some means to lend them a helping hand.” But who were these friendly governments? None helped Guangzhou.

The British and the conservatives claimed to stand for China’s unity and stability. But when the democrats were crushed, disorder spread. Nonetheless, the British preferred that disorder to power for the revolutionary republicans. What would change prospects for the struggle between the old order and for a modern nation-state in China was the huge costs to Britain of war with Germany, the so-called First World War, a European Civil War. The era when the finance imperialism of Britain could intervene against democracy world-wide swiftly came to an end. What followed was the short twentieth century of 1917 to 1989 when the policies and institutions of Russian Bolsheviks seemed to promise patriots all over the colonial and semi-colonial world a path to independence, strength and justice.

Yuan’s north, Sun’s south and groups imagining themselves as a moderate alternative to both bid for the support of China’s diverse regional armies, with Sun Yat-sen thinking “Always the success of [democratic] revolution depends upon the support of the navy.” Given how Holland and England seemed navy-based democracies in contrast to European continental army-based authoritarian regimes, it seemed obvious that the navy would be friendly to democracy.

The constitutionalists from the south in 1913 tried to get the Yangtze fleet to support them against Yuan’s northern coup-makers. But British banks and the British government joined with coup-maker Yuan to provide funds to keep the fleet loyal to Yuan. British diplomats considered the international finance spent on securing the loyalty of the Yuagtze fleet as “the deciding element in the whole situation.” Chiang Kai-shek agreed that the disloyalty of the navy to the republic was decisive.

It is not unreasonable also to see the outcome of the second revolution in 1913, an attempt to save the 1911 revolution from Yuan’s authoritarian north, as a struggle between British (and German) finance against Japanese finance for dominating influence in the rich Yangtze Valley region. The British actively intervened to hamper republican soldiers and to help the military of the authoritarian north. While the British described themselves as backing the forces of order, in fact, the pro-Yuan militaries tended to be plundering gangs, while the revolutionaries tended to be far more disciplined.

Seeing Yuan surrendering Mongolia to Russia and surrendering China’s fate and future to international finance in order to defeat the 1911 revolution in 1913, anti-foreign (except for their attitude toward Japan) nationalism intensified among revolutionaries. The American Consul-General in Shanghai, Amos Wilder, on August 5, 1913 concluded that nationalism might be trumps in the game of Chinese politics and therefore that the 1913 defeat of the revolutionaries was merely the loss of a battle and actually the start of a war.

If anything is clear, it is that a quiet neutrality is the part of foreigners in China, for the underdog of today may easily be the fellow on top tomorrow. Men are learning the revolutionary game and will practice it later….

As mentioned above, the revolutionaries around Sun re-thought their strategy. They built a single party focused on conquering power. They reached out to armed and dissatisfied elements in the poor countryside such as the White Wolf. They appealed to patriots to join them in freeing China from imperialist intervention.

Li Yuanhong and Sun Yat-sen agreed, Li happily and Sun sadly, that the merchants in Shanghai and Canton in 1913 sought the protection of Yuan’s northern troops and their foreign backers and refused to fund Sun’s second revolution. As Sun wrote in Minguo on June 8, 1914, “Chinese merchants met and asked…the protection of the British government. They believe the British can protect our merchants’ life and property, but they don’t consider the nation’s sovereignty.” As America Consul General Wilder put it,” the business interest welcome stable government regardless of its source.” The revolutionaries had come to be seen as bad for business. “If Hu [Hanmin’s revolutionary government in Canton] doesn’t go soon, paper money won’t rise soon.”

In Jiangxi, the Military Governor, Li Liejun, supported federalism, armed an opposition to Yuan, and promoted nationalist mobilization against opium. Yuan told his Political Council, “no province has heard more about republican principles than Jiangxi, nor more about liberty and equality than Canton; in fact these two provinces have been nothing less than an arena upon which the rebels could practice their experimental theories.” Northern entrenched interests would fight before they would surrender power and pelf to southern patriots.

Li bought weapons from Japan to resist Yuan. The British saw “an open breach between north and south…an active coalition had been formed between the provinces of Anhui, Kiangsi, Kwangtong, Fukien, and possibly Hunan to resisting Yuan Shih-kai…civil war was imminent.”

Actually, the south was not united. Some, as Song Jiaoren, had wanted to establish parliamentary power. Others such as Li Liejun and Hu Hanmin, wanted to strengthen the south so it could stand against the inevitable military assault from Yuan, which if peacefully resolved could provide a more federalist approach to state-building. The provinces, especially the forces represented in the provincial assemblies had staying power, even if Yuan won. Late Qing tax policies combined with no national army to deeply weaken the state center.

Li Liejun and Sun Yat-sen were closer to Japan, in contrast to Yuan who was closer to Britain. Both Li and Sun fled to Japan after Yuan’s coup. Li, in line with the Pan Asianism of India, China and Japan, founded a Drive Out the Whites club, whose goal “was to drive the white man out of Asia.” Independence require defeating Europeans, including Russians. But this project required a complicated politics.

The politically conscious in China were acutely aware of the vicissitudes of the Mexican Revolution which exploded a year before China’s 1911 Revolution. They found one lesson for China from Mexico was that anti-foreign nationalism could provoke intervention by neighboring great powers, for China by Japan or Russia or by superpower Britain. Patriotic passions had to be controlled.

The Japanese funded the second revolution in July 1913 in Guangdong. But the provincial assemblies in both Jiangxi and Guangdong would not support the armed over-throw of northern military leader Yuan Shikai. Money swiftly lost its value. “In sixteen days the insurrection in Canton…collapsed…without firing a shot….” The local soldiers would not fight against dictator Yuan. Constitutional government collapsed. Newspapers were closed. Editors were executed. Troops that fought for the republic were slaughtered. So was the Guangzhou police chief who had strongly supported progressive social reforms.

The school for impoverished girls was closed. The Canton Cement Company was forced to give way to the Green Island Cement Company. The revolution was over. YMCA Secretary Leisser noted, “The period of reaction in politics had already dawned.”

One-third of the debt redeemed with foreign loan money was paid to British and German banks. Life did not improve for local people. The British Governor of Hong Kong concluded,

When the people again turn on their oppressors it is more likely that they will seek to wreek their vengeance not on them alone but on the foreigners who helped Yuan in the recent rebellion and who drain the Provinces of much revenue to pay interest on foreign loans…such a situation [is] full of dangers…to the trade….

After the Yuan Shikai coup and his failed monarchist resurrection, China fell into warlordism. The subsequent Republic of China headed by Chiang Kai-shek was too weak (despite a major effort at rapid military modernization that persuaded Chiang that China could and should act to defeat Japan in 1937) to resist invasion by the Imperial Military of the Showa Era Emperor Hirohito. Such a history persuaded most politically conscious Chinese that nothing was more precious than full independence. The outcome of the failed 1911 revolution, however, was a weakened China and a divided nation. This made the country vulnerable. National weakness seemed an unforgivable crime.

Given a fixation on building an independent nation, it was natural not to notice how promoters of the 1911 revolution were infused by and influenced by a larger global history, one this paper has tried to sketch, one involving lessons from Germany, Mexico and Egypt. The reactionary forces of the old regime, an aristocracy of the loyal, deeply feared the liberal consequences of 1911. They defeated the constitutional promise of 1911 of ordered liberty as did similar forces all around the world in that pre WWI era, a tendency which made Stalinism – ending backwardness by rapid industrialization at any price – attractive globally as the path to real independence. The political choice seemed to be weakness or anti-liberal revolution and national strength.

But that era ended globally around 1989 when the Stalinist system in Russia disintegrated probably, as Deng Xiaoping contended, because of the defeat of Khrushchev’s reform agenda in 1964 and an entrenchment of conservative party forces in Moscow which cannibalized the economy instead of reforming it. The choice no longer was Mussolini versus Stalin. Consequently, the political issues which faced China and the world in the era around 1914, before the political polarization between an anti-democratic left and right, seemed, to many, to be back on the global agenda after 1989. In contrast, this paper details how the 1911 context was utterly different from 2011. After all, in 2011 it is world financial power China, not Britain, which can act globally on the side of order and cultural integrity and against universalist alien projects.

No one should be enamored of the chaos and violence of revolution. Such earth-shaking events occur largely because of the greed, fear and arrogance of entrenched interests which block reform. What is to be embraced is the transvaluation of values which peacefully legitimate a more humane agenda for all the people in a society. As Hegel noted, that is the true revolution. In that sense, the 1911 revolution remains a great achievement in legitimating the progressive and liberating promise of the nation-state. In that sense, it is wrong to claim that the 1911 revolution failed.

The Great War, the European Civil War, the so-called First World War, the inhumanities of gas war and trench war, however, changed everything. “It reduced to rubbish most of the humanistic internationalism and democratic nationalism which had been the emotional thread of our [liberal] intellectuals’ life,” noted Randolph Bourne in War and the Intellectuals. In China, and not only in China, the already weak forces that had seen an organic connection among freedom, the market, peace, and development further frayed. Some became followers of the militarized, racialized statism knows in Italy as fascism, while others were drawn to the promise of Russia’s Bolshevik Revolution. The progressive and liberating promise of China’s 1911 Revolution virtually disappeared.

Yuan Shikai crushed parliament, parties and press. WWI gave the lie to the liberal view of history in which, as Arno Mayer put it, “whereas democratic states are inherently peaceful, despotic governments...generate tensions leading to war.” Europe was re-imagined by patriots in colonial and semi-colonial countries as war-prone capitalist imperialism. Liberal democracy did not seem the friend of peace, development or oppressed peoples.

The U.S. Embassy in Beijing reported, soon after Yuan’s military coup ended China’s fledgling democracy, that Yuan’s “Government is anxious concerning the possibility of a new revolutionary movement....” In Guangdong, the misconduct of the army of the restored reactionary rulers alienated people. Old Chinese Revolutionary Alliance leaders mobilized against them. The British reported from the city of Shantou,

These are the favorite tactics of the Southerners: small bands appearing and disappearing, here, there, and everywhere ... the Kwangtung method of warfare is rather a puzzle to the Northern troops.... When the game is not played ‘according to Hoyle,’ they are rather at a disadvantage.

Germany’s power in China waned as a result of WWI. The Chinese government then

booted Germans out of Chinese governmental posts, stopped paying indemnities to Germany, seized German property, and tore down the Von Ketteler monument which had been erected in Beijing by the Germans to celebrate their conquests against the Boxer Rebellion. Japan, however, was not weakened. Sun Yat-sen was worried about Prussianized Chinese militarists coming to dominate China. “Shall we organize for war or shall we organize for peace? Our militarists and reactionaries desire the former, and they are going to Japanize China….” That is, Prussianist state socialism, an ideological predisposition of both left and right, had a lasting and war-prone militarist core.

In short, there seem to be a huge array of diverse opinions about the significance and consequence of the 1911 revolution, most importantly from within the camp of Chinese revolutionaries. My assessment is that the outcome of the 1911 revolution is reflective of a particular global moment. The fate of Sun, Sung, Hu, Huang et al. was shared by the other aborted democratizations of the pre-First World War era. But these structured dynamics are of little consequence for an age as totally different as is the one of 2011. China’s three trillion plus of foreign exchange in comparison to Britain’s deep financial crisis since 2007 should make clear that the balance of world forces in 2011 has little in common with 1911. This context, the focus of this paper, clarifies why the 1911 revolution, which was defeated by British dominated international finance, is not of much relevance to today’s China. In 2011 China need not be a beggar for foreign funds. In this very different world, it is the CCP government which has the money to make a difference all over the world on how to maintain stable and friendly governments and defeat alien forces.

1. The Seven Years War in the eighteenth century which helped launch revolutions in the USA, France, Haiti and Latin America is often described by historians of revolution as the real First World War. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. According to Yuan Weishi, the assassins were also linked to the most reactionary members of the Chiang Kai-shek network who agreed with Yuan that Song’s parliamentarism would de-stabilize China. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)