“The Idea of Human Equality at the Founding of the Chinese Republic, 1911”

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Introduction

Visitors to the People’s Republic of China during July 2011 could hardly fail to note that the month had been selected as the focal point for celebrations commemorating the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).[[1]](#footnote-1) Nationwide the Party sponsored events from the flashy to the academic, from the serious to the not so serious, including concerts, plays, speeches, museum displays and reenactments, as well as commissioning and producing no fewer than 28 films, including the blockbuster *Beginning of a Great Revival*. As recorded in a pictorial collection at the *Washington Post* website, one could visit the city of Chongqing—a city whose officials periodically participate in field labor in the spirit of the Cultural Revolution[[2]](#footnote-2)--for ceremonies and dress-up with period costumes and props.[[3]](#footnote-3)

A second anniversary celebration, somewhat less pronounced, was simultaneously in the works. In October 2010 the Standing Committee of the 11th National Committee of the People’s Political Consultative Conference had announced that 2011 would be commemorated as the centennial of the 1911 Chinese Revolution, commonly remembered outside China as the Republican or *Xinhai* Revolution (辛亥革命).[[4]](#footnote-4) In January 2011, five Chinese cities announced plans to commemorate the events of 1911 at their respective Sun Yat-sen memorial buildings during the months of September and October.[[5]](#footnote-5)

A cursory search via internet reveals no celebrations of the CCP anniversary outside China, but the 1911 Revolution was the subject of several. Xinhua reported in July that the anniversary had been observed in Hanoi “with a seminar held by Chinese Embassy in Vietnam and Institute of Chinese Studies under the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Similar seminars and academic meetings in honor of the event were sponsored in locations from Denmark to Washington, D.C.

Like any anniversary concerning Chinese history, the Revolution of 1911 within China is very much a matter of political interpretation, marking as it does at once the death of the Qing Dynasty and China’s long centuries under the imperial system, and the founding event for the Chinese Republic. But the Republican period is remembered as an era of internal warfare, invasion and occupation by Japan, terrible loss of life, finally come to an end with the victory of Mao and the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949. Outside China, the centennial offers the opportunity for scholars to revisit the central political questions essential to understanding the modern nation-state, and how citizenship, rights and civil liberties are understood. This is especially the case because the 1911 Revolution marks success for the *Tongmenhui* (中國同盟會) or Chinese Revolutionary Alliance, led for a time by Sun Yat-Sen, whose three-fold platform aimed “to expel the barbarians and thereby restore Chinese sovereignty, establish a republic, and redistribute land equally among the people.”

Within China, the 1911 Revolution is considered a beginning point, but a defective or insufficient one, leading as it does to further problems decisively rectified by the Communist Party, an interpretation made clear in the 1982 PRC Constitution’s Preamble:

The Revolution of 1911, led by Dr Sun Yat-sen, abolished the feudal monarchy and gave birth to the Republic of China. But the Chinese people had yet to fulfill their historical task of overthrowing imperialism and feudalism. After waging hard, protracted and tortuous struggles, armed and otherwise, the Chinese people of all nationalities led by the Communist Party of China with Chairman Mao Zedong as its leader ultimately, in 1949, overthrew the rule of imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism, won the great victory of the new-democratic revolution and founded the People's Republic of China. Thereupon the Chinese people took state power into their own hands and became masters of the country.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Two characteristic features of modern political society are rule of law and equality before the law, with the latter either supported explicitly in codified law, expressed as an objective, or at least a concept claimed, even if not, in fact, respected. The core idea of individual rights to life, freedom, property, and “pursuit of happiness” relies in large measure on recognition that no one human being is, by nature, the ruler of another, and that just laws treat citizens equally without discrimination on the basis of race, religion, ancestry, social or economic class or gender. A centenarian born in 1850 would have passed through life alongside great worldwide debates about slavery, political rights for property-less citizens and ethnic minorities, colonialism, and rights for women, in both the developed world and in newly independent countries.

But this is only half the story: Complicating matters was the simultaneous appearance and growth of Marxist thought, and less (or non-) violent but related progressive ideologies, offering an alternative understanding of equality. China in 1911 is intriguing as home to a massive population, with an intellectual class eager to found a non-imperial political system, aiming as well for independence from foreign occupation, and debating—often clashing over—which understanding of equality the new regime would follow. In this paper we consider the general concept of equality as it appears in a few prominent pre-Revolutionary points in Chinese history and during the 1911 Revolution, as a means of beginning to understand the possibility of an expanded political participation for Chinese women.

Summary of Events

The Qing Dynasty, founded in 1644 by Manchu peoples from the North of China, weakened significantly during the 19th century. Resentment by the ethnic majority Han population, kept in check for over two centuries, re-emerged alongside a series of difficulties for the Qing regime, most notably the outcomes of the Opium Wars (1839-42 and 1856-60), trade concessions forced by France, Britain, Japan, and the U.S., territorial encroachments by Russia, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Revolt (1850-71), and “a final blow”, the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95).[[8]](#footnote-8) Each of these, in addition to the defeat of the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 and long-standing trade and Christian mission concessions, served to demonstrate the weakness of the Qing Regime.

From the half century in China from 1861 to 1911, two broad yet ultimately moderate attempts at reform from within the Dynasty were attempted--the Self-Strengthening Movement (洋務運動 or 強運動, 1861-95), emphasizing Chinese acquisition of modern weapons and technology as cautiously first proposed by Lin Tse-hsu shortly after the conclusion of the First Opium War in 1842. The second, the Hundred Days Reforms (戊戌變法) was attempted during the summer of 1898 by Guangxu Emperor (r. 1875-1898) but was stymied by his aunt, the Empress Dowager Cixi, who used the Reforms as excuse for her de facto *coup d’etat,* ending any chance for moderate reform from within.[[9]](#footnote-9) The following three years featured the dramatic rise of the Society of Harmonious Fists, invasion in response by the Eight-Nation Alliance, and the further weakening of the regime over the next decade. In 1905 Dr. Sun Yat-sen returned to Japan from travels in Europe, founding the *Tongmenhui* (China Revolutionary League). A separate movement had aimed to transform the regime into a constitutional monarchy with a parliament, but the death of Guangxu Emperor in 1908 ended that prospect.[[10]](#footnote-10) Following several ineffective attempts at sparking revolution, the *Tongmenhui* was successful, and on October 10, 1911, the Qing regime had fallen.

The Idea of Equality in Chinese Political History

One recognizes at the outset that any attempt to discuss a broad political concept like “equality” is necessarily fraught with several levels of difficulty. China began to emerge from centuries of introversion and imperial rule at a complex moment in the history of ideas, one informed on the one hand by ideas about the state of nature and natural condition of man, and, by extension, the proper role and extent of government by John Locke, Montesquieu, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, with those ideas directly contested by a new wave of ideas about government launched by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel. While the former looked to the concept of an unchanging human nature, individual rights, rule of law and limited government, the latter looked to history and progress, rejecting the idea of a consistent human nature, holding out the hope for significant change, and limitless government. These latter ideas, of course, informed Marx and the communist movement, writing in the mid-19th century just as China began its own early efforts at reform. For Marx, the future held a traumatic period of revolution that would usher in a new phase of human existence with property, family and political life abandoned in favor of communism, and it was the duty of those who understood this inevitable *telos* of history to lead toward that goal, and to be willing to crush their opposition. For others, the objectives of an improved society and humanity could be achieved without the violent cataclysm that Marx proposed, but requiring larger, more active government, and an emphasis on collective rather than individual rights.

With respect to the idea of equality generally, the essential distinction would over time become one between equality of rights vs. equality of result: the Jeffersonian understanding of a self-evident truth, “that all men are created equal” would be rejected as insufficient by progressives, requiring its larger government to engage in policies leading toward equality of result. Applied to economics, progressivism then and now promotes the idea of economic leveling as “social justice”, while applied to gender and in the form of feminism, arguing for as much distance as possible from the inequalities imposed by nature and toward a *telos* of perfect sameness.

This intellectual movement, with origins in German, French and British universities would quickly inform political thought throughout the European continent and would migrate to American universities during the 1880s and 1890s. It was this progressive understanding of politics that not only gave its name to the era, but predominated within the academic centers just as Chinese intellectuals begin looking to the West for ideas in government reform. This was true for major figures in Chinese intellectual history, as well as lesser known but influential figures such as Zhang Junmai (a.k.a. Carson Chang, 1887-1969).

With respect to the appearance and advancement of equality in Chinese political history, one faces the complications discussed above alongside the challenge of translating terminology from one of the world’s most ancient languages, and within the context of Asian culture that has tended not to place emphasis on the individual but on human relationships. The Chinese characters for “equality” 平等, a neologism, combines the character meaning “flat” or “balance” with the character for “class” and “rank”.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In his most recent opus, *On China*, Henry Kissinger begins with an extensive discussion of the understanding ancient Chinese had of themselves and their place in the world.[[12]](#footnote-12) Within China, Confucian thought argued against equality, pressing instead for “a hierarchical social creed: the fundamental duty was to ‘Know thy place.’” That is to say that human relationships, bilateral and multilateral, far outweigh the individual. One might add that one’s duty was to accept that place and avoid expressions of discontent or efforts at advancement. Ch’en Tu-hsiu, an important figure in the anti-Confucian “New Culture Movement” argues that the Confucian principle of “Three Bonds”—loyalty of minister to prince, of son to father, and of wife to husband—serve as “the very foundation of monarchical despotism and social inequality.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

With respect to China’s neighbor populations, Kissinger argues that the country and culture developed over four millennia a strong and abiding perception of their centrality and superiority over all else. The Chinese Emperor is recognized as the ruler of “All Under Heaven”, that is, of all humanity, a perception that derived from the Chinese subcontinent’s geographic location, extent, wealth and self-sufficiency, and the political necessity to focus inward to prevent, whenever possible, disunity and vulnerability to external forces. For three and a half millennia, the predator peoples had come from the North and West (Tartars, Mongols, Uyghurs); for the last 500 years, they had come from Europe, Japan and North America. About the Chinese perception of its place with respect to its neighbors, Kissinger writes, “In its imperial role, China offered surrounding foreign peoples impartiality, not equality: it would treat them humanely and compassionately in proportion to their attainment of Chinese culture and their observance of rituals connoting submission to China.”[[14]](#footnote-14) China had little place for the idea of equality of peoples and nations, argues Kissinger, because it “was never engaged in sustained contact with another country on the basis of equality for the simple reason that it never encountered societies of comparable culture or magnitude.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Thus China for centuries, quite logically, recognizes little or no equality among nations or peoples, but instead a clear hierarchy of both.

Han Chinese sensibilities about race had been further hardened in some circles from the outset of the Qing Dynasty. 17th century Ming loyalist Wang Fu-chih argued that the races had been shaped by the peculiarities of their respective geographies, with cultures emerging that could not be adapted or understood by outsiders. The consequence of Wang’s idea was to conclude that foreigners, i.e., Manchus, could not properly rule Han Chinese, but the concept was embraced prior to 1911 by the *Tongmenhui* as part of their argument against the imperial powers.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The Taiping Rebellion (1851-64), led by Christian convert Hung Xiuquan, commended a radical equality of result, ending all distinctions of class via a redistribution of land and its communal exploitation, and an equality of the sexes, including abolition of prostitution, foot-binding, and placing women in administrative positions within the Taiping military.[[17]](#footnote-17)

If the great national convulsion of Taiping offered equality in radical form, the reform efforts of the Self-Strengthening Movement (1861-1895) offered reform directed almost completely at China’s external relations. Typical descriptions of the Movement emphasize its grounding in Confucian thought, informed by a confidence in the continued superiority of Chinese ways, with the immediate aim being to learn from foreigners about their technology, improve upon it, and ultimately surpass them, thereby restoring an assumed superiority of Chinese ways. The Movement is described without reference to an emerging sense of equality, though one might speculate as to whether Chinese military personnel sent abroad to study in American and European military academies were so influenced.

The final effort at an internal reform, the Hundred Days Reforms of summer 1898, did propose actual governmental and social reform that involved explicit references to equality. The centerpiece of this was Guangxu Emperor’s decision, supported by several intellectual leaders of the reform era, most notably Kang Yuwei, to relinquish his imperial throne, giving over political power to a parliamentary body. Alongside this came proposals to end the exam system built around Confucian classical texts and bureaucratic reform to expunge honorary salaried positions. As noted above, the proposals of the Hundred Days were halted by the Empress Dowager, but several of the ideas remained topics of discussion among intellectuals within the Qing Dynasty interested in avoiding revolution.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The Empress Dowager’s interest in avoiding revolution was further revealed by the commissioning of two delegations to study European and American constitutions in 1905. Their report, published in 1906, includes oblique references to political equality in western systems, particularly with respect to monarch to citizen relations. In a section explaining the idea of constitutional monarchy, the delegates report that,

As for the stipulation that the person of the monarch is not to be violated, both the constitution by royal order and that by common discussion include this provision. For the monarch is also human. Perchance he might commit a mistake in policy, which would harm the people and run contrary to the basic purpose of the constitution government . . . Therefore there must be high ministers to assist the monarch. In case of unsuitable administration or unconstitutional acts, then the monarch’s assistants can be blamed for not doing their duty.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The most explicit references to equality appear in the revolutionary document, the 1905 Manifesto of the *Tongmenhui.* This brief (ca. 1200 words in English translation) document includes discussion of political equality alongside references to economic leveling. The document begins by recalling and paying respect to past revolutions, but notes that the planned revolution differs in character and extent:

. . . the revolutions in former generations, such as the Ming Dynasty and the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, were concerned only with the driving out of barbarians and the restoration of Chinese rule. Aside from these they sought no other change. We today are different from people of former times. Besides the driving out of the barbarian dynasty and the restoration of China, it is necessary also to change the national policy and the people’s livelihood. And though there are a myriad ways and means to achieve this goal, the essential spirit that runs through them all is freedom, equality, and fraternity.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The revolutions of the past, the document notes in this preamble, were “hero’s revolutions” but the present contemplated revolution differs—it is a “national” or “citizens’” revolution, a term that means “all people in the nation will have the spirit of freedom, equality, and fraternity; that is, they will all bear the responsibility of revolution.”

The first two *Tongmenhui* objectives as stated in the Manifesto—expulsion of the Tartars (Manchus of the Qing Dynasty) and restoration of the Chinese state are followed by two more remarkable political and economic points, both centered on equality. The third, “Establish the Republic”, is explicit:

Now our revolution is based on equality, in order to establish a republican government. All our people are equal and all enjoy political rights. The president will be publicly chosen by the people of the country. The parliament will be made up of members publicly chosen by the people of the country. A constitution of the Chinese Republic will be enacted, and every person must abide by it. Whoever dares to make himself a monarch shall be attacked by the whole country.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The document’s fourth section is entitled “Equalize Land Ownership”, and aims to resolve the longstanding problem of property accumulation and the resulting inability for economic growth in China:

The good fortune of civilization is to be shared equally by all the people of the nation. We should improve our social economic organization, and assess the value of all the land in the country. Its present price shall be received by the owner, but all increases in value resulting from reform and social improvements after the revolution shall belong to the state, to be shared by all the people, in order to create a socialist state, where each family within the empire can be well supported, each person satisfied, and no one fail to secure employment.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The Manifesto concludes with an implementation plan and timeline, and specific “evils in social customs” that will be eliminated with the new regime including “the keeping of slaves, the cruelty of foot-binding,” opium and *feng-shui*, the first two of which stand as testaments to inequality, and at last by noting that “It is hoped that our people will proceed in due order and cultivate their free and equal status; the foundation of the Chinese Republic will be entirely based on this.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Sun Yat-sen’s own views on equality and government received expression on several occasions, and echo the Manifesto*.* Interestingly, they reveal a strong similarity to the progressive European understanding of equality of rights as requiring curbs on private property ownership:

. . . the aim of our revolution is to plan for the welfare of the masses. Because we do not approve of the monopoly held by a Manchu minority, we desire a national revolution. Because we do not approve of the monopoly held by the monarch, we desire a political revolution. Because we do not approve of the monopoly held by a wealthy minority, we desire a social revolution.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Sun Yat-sen and his revolutionaries have been criticized for theorizing about the direction of a post-Manchu government while offering little specific instruction beyond the several paragraphs in the Manifesto. In the one significant speech where he comes closest to describing a post-Qing Dynasty government, he specifically argues that while the U.S. Constitution was the best written document, it had become now out of date,[[25]](#footnote-25) a sentiment common in European universities among followers of the new “political science” and eagerly picked up by American progressives. To build upon the American system, he proposed a government for the future Republic of China with five branches. Beyond legislative, executive and judicial, a fourth, examination, would ensure that officeholders were qualified and had not won election on the basis of mere oratorical powers or bribery while a fifth, control, would exist to prevent the domination of the executive by the legislative branch, a prospect that Sun saw as an ongoing danger in the U.S. without a strong-willed President in office.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Sun Yat-sen and his revolutionary compatriots appear to have been skeptical of the idea of individual equality applied to China, for several reasons. With respect to culture, the concept had no foundation or strong tradition—the idea of individualism existed among a relatively tiny intellectual elite. It would also be unreasonable to expect the revolutionaries to have abandoned the essential ideas of Chinese culture in short order, nor with China’s long history is it surprising that Sun Yat-sen hoped not simply to copy western governments, but to offer to the world an example of representative government with Chinese characteristics. Moreover, the longstanding subjection of China to outside forces made them acutely eager to avoid any possible fracturing of China, or its population.[[27]](#footnote-27)

In terms of political influences from abroad, it should come as no surprise that Prussian and progressive European political thought held more appeal to the *Tongmenhui* than did the highly individualistic thought laid down at the American founding. Practically speaking, it does also appear that for several reasons the Chinese revolutionaries of 1911 were simply more familiar with the writings of German theorists—for example, the Japanese appeared to have adopted those same ideas successfully and had copies of their books translated, and thus accessible to many Chinese scholars studying in Japan.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The general trend in Chinese intellectual conversations about government following a revolution involved a debate over government writers from England and Germany. The Meiji government in Japan had followed German writers on government Johann Kaspar Bluntschli, Max von Seydel, Konrad Bornhak. Chinese political theorists were troubled by the concept of divided government they saw in the U.S., expecting that the divisions between branches of government combined with American federalism (and very likely as well the near splitting of the country in the then-recent Civil War) all led them to turn instead toward European parliamentary systems with a more unified system. Moreover, the experience of Germany—fractured and weak, at the mercy of foreign powers until unified by a revolutionary government—appeared similar to where the Chinese were before 1911 and where they hoped to be: Germany by 1900 as unified by Prussia had become a major power in Europe.

Chinese reformers during the period leading to the 1911 Revolution could also see--daunting though the prospect was—of the necessity of broadening citizenship in China. Sun Yat Sen’s colleague and friend Huang Hsing came to this conclusion in 1905 with other Chinese sent to Japan to observe its educational system, and noting the civic education students received.[[29]](#footnote-29) National strength and dignity would require an existential change for millions of Chinese peasants—they would need to be transformed, through education, into citizens with an understanding of their individuality, their equality with their fellow citizens, and their rights before the law.

It would be a truism to note that revolutions, once unleashed, are hard to control. In the particular instance of the 1911 Revolution, Huang Hsing noted in a 1912 letter to General Yuan Shikai the importance of keeping discipline and order, including clarifying for those needing it the limitations of the new equality:

Recently the meaning of a Republic has often been misunderstood by students. Their extreme views have often obscured the truth. If unchecked, rebellion against parents would be considered equality. Hence the national order and the five human relationships would be out of control; without the family, there would be no country to speak of. . . If this tendency is unchecked, law and order would be disrupted, justice would be destroyed, people would be motivated only by selfishness, and material gains and the country would be on the verge of disintegration.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Similarly, in a letter to the Shanghai Society for Promoting Traditional Ethics, he noted:

I have heard of what you mentioned in your letter about some people, who, in the name of freedom, have violated the law, and in the name of equality, have gone against their elder brothers and their parents. This is an unprecedented change unexpected by those of us who first advocated the revolution and the republican form of government.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Thus if the idea of equality with a recently minted ideogram was clearly a topic of conversation in Chinese intellectual and political circles at the turn of the century. Its adaptation to China, especially with respect to property, would prove complex, as would its impact on political participation for women.

Women and Equality in China

The Chinese Mission to the UN web document “Gender Equality and Women’s Development in China” offers no attention to history prior to 1949.[[32]](#footnote-32) Where, then, to begin to understand this fascinating aspect of Chinese political thought? With respect to etymology, at some point, likely in the late 19th century, readers of Chinese begin to speak of equality of the sexes, in Mandarin 两性平等, lit. “two genders equality”.

Respecting the many centuries of Chinese history prior to the Qing Dynasty, one would err in oversimplifying the situation of women in highly stratified and a highly developed social system. While only one female, Empress Wu Zetian (624-705 CE), ruled China during centuries of imperial rule, it is useful to remind ourselves that political decisions and influence happen at many levels, and through the obvious and the not so obvious. Equality in the sense the term is used in our time--individual political participation as voter, candidate for public office, bureaucrat, etc.--was hardly part of the picture, but a more complete investigation would ask to what extent, and in what formal and informal ways—in literature, poetry, cultural and community activities--Chinese women influenced political decisions, large and small.[[33]](#footnote-33) Greater political participation for women as we understand the concept now emerges over time thanks in large measure to myriad advances in technology, improving everything from a nation’s overall wealth to medicine and health to food preservation, each of which have the net effect of offering individuals more time and the consequent freedom to take action on a larger scale.

Within Chinese culture long centuries prior to modernity, traditional Taoist emphasis focused on the balance offered by nature, *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽, reflected within human species as male and female—both equally human, yet each with peculiar functions, traits and tendencies that translate into respective spheres of life. As well, *Daodejing* is notable for frequent references to female deities, and apparently recommending human qualities typically considered feminine in tone and character.[[34]](#footnote-34)

General histories of China have tended to offer minimal attention to the place of women in society. Meskill’s *Introduction to Chinese Civilization* describes the T’ang Period as one of new limitations on female activity among the upper classes, inspired, perhaps, by the spread of Confucian thought with its emphasis on familial order, alongside hostility toward Buddhism and its “relative indifference to status, including that of men and women” as probable sources.[[35]](#footnote-35) More specifically, Neo-Confucian thought during the S’ung Period is especially pinpointed by historians as the era at which footbinding becomes widespread among upper-class Han women. In any case, Confucian schools of thought place emphasis on harmony and keeping of good order, recommending that women keep to their place within social structure, counsel that modern critics would describe as inequality.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Add to this the phenomenon of polygyny, apparently common among Chinese royalty and persons of wealth. An abiding question concerns the political implications of polygyny: To what degree does the practice, if widespread, promote a spirit of inequality (both between men and women, and among men, some of whom will go without wives, and among women, some of whom will have only a fraction of a husband), with significant implications about government? In an 1850s letter of journalist Wang T’ao arguing for political reform, the author takes note of news about England’s royalty, and the spirit of equality that extends from the monarch’s relationship to citizens to his conjugal relations: “The real strength of England, however, lies in the fact that there is a sympathetic understanding between the governing and the governed, a close relationship between the ruler and the people.” Later in the document, he notes, “The king has only one queen and besides her there is no concubine, and there has never been a multitude of three thousand beautiful women in the harem.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

Into the centuries-long traditions of China, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom in the 1850s offered extreme change. In areas under Taiping control, women were permitted to take the Civil Service exams and perform military service. informed as it was by truly radical ideas—that a transformation of human nature could be introduced—allowed the idea that marriage and the family should be abolished, with women treated not just equally but exactly the same as men.

Also radical in character were the ideas of noted intellectual and imperial advisor Kang Yuwei’s (1858-1927). His connection with the Hundred Days Reforms is especially notable concerning the equality he saw for women—abolition of the family, alongside an end to private property and capitalism. More likely to receive broad support was a moderate approach, of reform-minded women becoming more active within a Chinese social context. At least one scholar of female participation in Chinese political reform has discovered this, finding women active in the 1898 reforms, pursuing ideas from outside China and winning financial and moral support from westerners.[[38]](#footnote-38)

If a greater degree of political equality for women in China was a topic of conversation in 1911, it required two crucial things: First, the concept of equality before the law, allowing for its gradual extension as circumstances permit. Second, advances in technology that would make equality a practical and realizable objective. Both would arrive, and the 1911 Revolution marks a beginning, if ultimately an insufficient step.

**Conclusion**

The list of obstacles to any kind of democratic reform in China during the first decades of the 20th century that would lead toward equality of rights is a long one: A massive population without democratic traditions but a deeply embedded and often hierarchical Confucian philosophy, an entrenched if weakened dynasty in a long-standing imperial tradition, the emerging radical challenge of Marxism denying the possibility of a democratic equality, and regional military powerbases each spelled doom for Chinese political reform in the early 20th century.

Political discussion within China focused, not surprisingly, on the nature of imperialism and the regimes of Europe. Political reform discussed within the Qing Dynasty came to appreciate the necessity of moving toward a constitutional monarchy, but too little, too late. Combined with the Dynasty’s defensive posture meant that political reform connected to equality would be virtually impossible. However, the revolutionaries of the first and second decades in the 20th century were apparently willing, often putting their lives on the line, to support equality before law in China.

Respecting greater legal equality for women, one might observe in closing that while the Revolution offered no remarkable broad-scale advance, it did find women taking an active part in revolutionary activities, and paving the way for larger-scale advances that would follow. In openly embracing the concept of equality, the 1911 revolutionaries may have taken the first steps that in due course result in greater political equality for women.

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7. People’s Republic of China Constitution, Dec. 4, 1982, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/constitution/constitution.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Michael Gasster, *Chinese Intellectuals and the Revolution of 1911* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1969), 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gasster, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Roger B. Jeans, *Democracy and Socialism in Republican China* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997) , 19-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The author would welcome assistance from an historian of Chinese etymology as to the first uses of the term. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Chester Tan, *Chinese Political Thought in the 20th Century* (London: David and Charles, 1971), 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Kissinger, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Kissinger, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Gasster, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See, for example, the excerpt from the core Taiping document, “The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom,” 1853, at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/taiping.asp> [Accessed Aug. 3, 2011]. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See, for example, “A Memorial of Chang Chih-tung and Yuan Shih-kai Urging Abolition of the Old Examinations, 1903” in Ssu-Yu Zen Sun and John K. Fairbank, *China’s Response to the West: A Documentary Survey 1839-1923* (New York: Atheneum, 1963), 206-207. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. “A Report on Constitutional Governments Abroad, 1906” as reprinted in Sun and Fairbank, 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. “Manifesto of the Tongmenhui”, 1905, as reprinted in Sun and Fairbank, 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Manifesto. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. As quoted in Gasster, p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Gasster, p. 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Gasster, p. 136 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Tragically, this very factionalism and fracturing of the Republic would take place over the next two decades. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Gasster, p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Chin Ch’ung-chi and Hu Sheng-wu, “Huang Hsing: Co-founder of the Republic of China,” in Chun-tu Hsueh, Revolutionary Leaders of Modern China,” (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Huang Hsing letter to Yuan Shikai, 1912, as quoted in Chin Ch’ung-chi and Hu Sheng-wu, “Huang Hsing: Co-founder of the Republic of China.” [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Huang Hsing letter to the Shanghai Society for Promoting Traditional Ethics, as quoted in Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations,“Gender Equality and Womens’ Development in China” <http://www.china-un.ch/eng/bjzl/t210715.htm> [Accessed Aug. 22, 2011]. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. One interesting example is the concept of *xianyuan* “worthy ladies”, a literary culture of women from the Wei-Jin era. See Nanxiu Qian, “Revitalizing the *Xianyuan* (Worthy Ladies) Tradition: Women in the 1898 Reforms,” Modern China, October 2003, 402. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. For example, chapters 6 and 28, as published in *The Daodejing of Laozi*, trans. By Philip J. Ivanoe (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2003), 6, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. John Meskill, *An Introduction to Chinese Civilization* (New York: D.C. Heath and Company, 1973), 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. For a useful discussion of this issue in Taiwan, see Joel S. Fetzer and J Christopher Soper, “Confucian Values and Elite Support for Liberal Democracy in Taiwan: The Perils of Priestly Religion,” *Politics and Religion*, 3 (2010), 495-517. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Letter of Wang T’ao, ca. 1858, as reprinted in Ssu-Yu Zen Sun and John K. Fairbank, *China’s Response to the West: A Documentary Survey 1839-1923* (New York: Atheneum, 1963), 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Qian, “Revitalizing . . .” [↑](#footnote-ref-38)