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THE PRESENT AND THE PAST

Modern China

A History

Second Edition

Edwin E. Moise



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The collapse of the old order

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Manchu government of China was under severe pressures both internal and external. Its longstanding policy of isolationism was beginning to break down in the face of European military superiority; the Opium War of 1839–42 was only the first of a series of Chinese military defeats. In the 1850s and 1860s, the Taiping Rebellion almost destroyed the dynasty from within.

The Manchus were very reluctant to carry out any extensive reforms in the face of these threats. They had barely begun to attempt serious modernization when they were overthrown by the Revolution of 1911. The revolution aroused high hopes, but within about five years central government collapsed completely, and China was divided among various warlords. The challenge of establishing an effective government, capable of restoring order and defending the country against foreign encroachment, remained unmet.

The first Western impact

The general attitude of both Manchus and Chinese was that China had the highest, and in a sense the only, true civilization. They were willing to have contact with foreign cultures only on the assumption that the foreigners were barbarians who acknowledged the superiority of Chinese culture and the Emperor of China, and presented tribute to the Emperor as a sign of submission. China's immediate neighbours, such as the Vietnamese, Burmese, and Koreans, had generally been willing to give at least lip-service to this doctrine. The Jesuits won acceptance partly through their scientific knowledge, especially in astronomy, but the main key to their success was that they complied with Chinese expectations by adopting many aspects of Chinese culture. Eventually, in fact, the Pope became disturbed by the question of

who was converting whom. In the early eighteenth century, when the Pope began ordering the Jesuits to behave more like Christian missionaries and less like Confucian scholars, their influence at the imperial court declined.

However, in the early nineteenth century the Europeans, and in particular the British, became unwilling to accept the system and the rather insulting restrictions that went with it. Western trade was permitted only at the south-coast port of Guangzhou, and the European merchants were not permitted year-round residence even there. Western diplomats had contact only with provincial officials in Guangzhou, not with the central government in Beijing. Christian missionary activity was forbidden. Britain, the greatest trading power in the world, wanted the right to trade more freely, to maintain an ambassador in Beijing, and to send missionaries into China.

Friction over these issues was exacerbated by the problem of opium. For many years European merchants seeking tea, silk, porcelain, and other luxuries had bought more from China than they sold, and paid for the difference in gold and silver. This was where much of the wealth that the Spanish had taken from Latin America had eventually gone. But early in the nineteenth century the British had begun selling tremendous quantities of opium, acquitted from their new possessions in India, to China. Soon the balance of payments had shifted, and gold and silver were flowing out of China. This caused an economic crisis as well as a tremendous drug-abuse problem.

In the late 1830s the Chinese government made a serious effort to eradicate the opium traffic. An energetic and competent administrator named Lin Zexu (Lin Tse-hsu) was sent to Guangzhou to manage the campaign. Officials there had already launched an effective drive against the Chinese smugglers who had been distributing opium within China; Lin decided also to go after the foreign merchants (most of them British, but some from the United States and other nations) who had been supplying the Chinese smugglers. In March 1839, Lin placed about 350 foreign merchants under a polite sort of siege in their compound in Guangzhou. They were not physically harmed, or cut off from food supplies, but their Chinese servants all had to leave the compound, and the hostage merchants were not allowed either to trade or to leave until the merchant community had handed over its opium stocks to be destroyed. The British government's representative on the scene, Captain Charles Elliot, collected more than 1,000 tons of opium from the merchants and handed it over to Lin.

Lin had a more sophisticated understanding of the foreigners than most Chinese officials, but he had no conception of how important the opium trade was to the economy of the British Empire, or of how powerfully the British could and would react to any threat against their merchants. He had started what became known as the Opium War. For China it was a disaster from beginning to end. The British Navy roamed the coasts at will. Even on land the Chinese Army was inferior in weapons, training, and discipline, besides

being riddled with opium addiction. Most of the officers were hopelessly incompetent, as one might expect in a society where it was said that one does not waste good iron by making it into nails, or good men by making them into soldiers. By 1842 China was forced to submit. Britain acquired the island of Hong Kong and an indemnity. Missionaries and merchants were henceforth allowed to live, trade, and preach in five 'treaty ports' along the coast.

Later negotiations with other Western powers, plus wars in which China was defeated by Britain and France (1856–60), France (1883–85), Japan (1894–95), and Britain, France, Japan, Russia, and the United States all together (1900), led to further privileges for the foreigners, under what became known as the Treaty System. The list of treaty ports expanded steadily; by 1917 there were ninety-two of them. (Most of these 'ports' were in fact ports, either along the coast or on the Yangzi River, but some were landlocked cities.) Foreign influence was substantial in all treaty ports; portions of Shanghai and fifteen other treaty ports were placed under outright foreign administration, mainly British.

Christian missionaries could move freely throughout China, and merchants could circulate to a considerable extent. The 'most favoured nation' principle ensured that any privilege given to one European power also went automatically to the others. Under the principle of extraterritoriality, no Westerner accused of a crime in China could be tried under Chinese law; Western courts were established in the treaty ports to try such cases. The tariff that China could collect on its imports was limited by treaty to 5 per cent, and in practice it often was below even this limit. The Maritime Customs Service, which collected the small permitted tariff, was run by foreigners (mainly British). Eventually, significant numbers of Western troops began to be stationed in China as protection for Western residents and as guards on foreign-owned railroads. Foreign warships operated not only off China's coast, but even on her inland waterways.

Internal problems

The dynastic weakness that made China vulnerable to these foreign incursions also increased her susceptibility to internal rebellion. The population had increased dramatically under the Qing; it probably reached 400 million some time between 1800 and 1850. Traditional forms of technology were not capable of providing a decent living for so many people. At the same time the government was growing lax. Local officials, who had collected taxes primarily as agents of the central government early in the dynasty, were now keeping most of what they got and passing on only a fraction of their take to the Emperor. Wealthy individuals acquired greater influence over local administrators and thus became increasingly able to evade taxation, throwing the

burden onto the poor. The peasants, short of land, paid increasingly heavy taxes while the amount of revenue actually reaching the Emperor declined. Poverty drove thousands to banditry. The Manchu army, its original spirit sapped by generations of garrison duty within China, had deteriorated badly; many units were almost useless. As the government's ability to maintain order declined, local leaders began raising their own militias to protect their villages.

Dynastic decay had gone far enough to permit a serious rebellion by the 'White Lotus' Buddhist sect in Central China at the end of the eighteenth century. The outbreak of the Taiping Rebellion in the mid nineteenth century led to an even greater crisis. It began in the hills of South China, where a religious visionary claiming to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ founded a sect incorporating elements of Christianity. His movement spread, came into conflict with the government, and developed its own army. Soon it was calling itself the Taiping Tianguo, or 'Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace'. Sweeping north and east into the basin of the Yangzi River, the richest and most populous region of China, the 'Heavenly King' established his capital at Nanjing (Nanking) in 1853. He could not take the Manchu capital at Beijing, but the government armies proved equally incapable of destroying the rebels.

The Manchus then turned to regional militias formed by the local gentry, and allowed some of these militias to develop into real armies. The man who initiated this development, Zeng Guofan (Tseng Kuo-fan), had originally been a civilian rather than a military official; he had won entry to the bureaucracy by the usual means, success in the civil service examinations. He had served in a number of important posts in the central government in Beijing, but at the beginning of 1853 he was at his home in Hunan province, having been released from his duties for the customary period of mourning following the death of his mother. He received an imperial order to supervise the organization of local militia forces in his home area, to resist the Taipings. He quickly began to build a much larger and more powerful force than the men who had sent him this order had intended.

This was not something the Manchus could afford to take lightly; they had not forgotten the lesson their ancestors had learned from the rebellion of 1673. However assimilated they might be to Chinese culture, the Manchus knew that they were a small number of aliens dominating a huge number of Chinese; any concentration of power in Chinese hands was potentially dangerous. The typical Confucian scholar's lack of respect for soldiers and military affairs ('one does not waste good iron by making it into nails...') had been a comfort to the Manchus, since it had left bureaucrats trained in the Confucian tradition poorly qualified to lead rebellions. The Qing Dynasty's armies had always included Chinese soldiers under Chinese officers, but these officers had not usually been conspicuous for their intelligence, and they had been rotated from unit to unit to keep them from building excessively strong personal bonds.

So here was Zeng Guofan, long known for his intellect and now showing himself to be aggressively innovative as well, operating in his home province (where he could never have been given any normal bureaucratic appointment), recruiting out of the local élite officers who had personal ties with him and with one another, officers who in turn led troops from the same area, with whom they had personal ties.

When the Emperor and his Court learned what was happening they hesitated. Eventually they not only tolerated what Zeng was doing, but allowed him the financial resources to pay his men better than regular imperial troops were paid. The fact that top officials in Beijing knew Zeng, from the years he had worked there, may have helped them make the decision to trust him. Soon others were organizing similar armies in other provinces. For the Dynasty the gamble paid off; the regional armies that grew up outside the regular chain of command put down the Taiping Rebellion, and other smaller rebellions in other regions of China, and remained loyal. The Westerners also provided the Qing government with some useful support against the Taipings, feeling that it was worth working with the existing government despite the fact that they did not really like it. One should particularly note the 'Ever-victorious Army', a small Chinese force commanded originally by an American named Frederick Ward, and later by a British officer, Major Charles Gordon. It was very successful in fighting against the Taipings near the mouth of the Yangzi River. Such Western intervention, however, was much less important than the support provided for the Qing by the regional armies.

The leaders of these regional armies acquired tremendous power. The greatest of them was Li Hongzhan (Li Hung-chang), a native of Anhui province who had worked for a while under Zeng Guofan in the Hunan Army, but then had gone to Anhui to establish a similar force. After the defeat of the Taipings, he took for many years a large part of the responsibility for conducting China's foreign relations. He had his own army, under officers he had chosen and promoted, equipped to a considerable extent from his own arsenals. He also controlled much of China's naval forces. He was governor-general of a province, and had privileged access to tax revenues from other provinces to pay for his military forces. He sponsored several efforts to introduce modern technology into China.

Some Chinese were beginning to feel that they needed to learn from the foreigners, but this awareness developed very slowly. The idea of learning from foreigners seemed very abnormal in the light of Chinese tradition. In the English-speaking world today, most children grow up knowing that they use an alphabet developed in Italy, a political system whose origins go back to Greece, and a religion that comes from the Middle East. Their very ancestry can be traced more often than not to immigrant stock – Angles, Saxons, Danes, Normans, and so forth – who invaded Britain after the fall of the Roman Empire, and various groups that have migrated to the United States, Canada, and other English-speaking countries within the past 400 years. The

ancestors of the modern Chinese, by contrast, had lived in China for all of recorded history. They had only once in their history engaged in large-scale borrowing from abroad, when they had adopted Buddhism. As far as most Chinese knew, the biggest foreign-inspired modification that had occurred in their culture in the past thousand years had been the imposition by the Manchus of a new hair style on their subjects (the Chinese were required, under the Manchus, to wear their hair in a single braid, called a queue, hanging down the back). Most Chinese still believed that it was the foreigners who needed to copy the superior civilization of China.

The Chinese had been shocked by the defeats they had suffered at the hands of the West, but they did not respect the military profession enough to feel that someone who was militarily strong was necessarily worthy of respect or imitation. What they most valued was the literary and philosophical knowledge, especially of the Confucian classics, that both defined the gentleman and formed the qualifications for high office in the government. When the Manchu warriors had conquered China, it had been they who had imitated and been absorbed by the Chinese, rather than the other way round.

Initially some men, especially leaders of the regional armies, tried to introduce particular Western devices without imitating the West in any more basic way. Rifles and Western-style cannon came first; steamships, railroads, and telegraph lines followed. The policy was to use Western techniques as tools while retaining Chinese culture as the fundamental basis for all activity. This policy showed a distressing lack of success. For one thing, the foreigners had to be handled and dealt with, and this required far more than knowledge of a few techniques. Chinese officials had to know Western languages, commercial practices, behaviour patterns, and concepts of international law before they would be able to understand what the foreigners wanted, and how it could be either granted or refused with minimal cost to China. Moreover, even simple matters of technology did not work very well when taken out of their cultural context. The Chinese could manufacture artillery to Western designs, but it was not actually much use in battle as long as it remained, to the troops, an essentially alien device. The same applied in other areas. Superficial adoption of a few Western techniques could not even begin to save the country from the degree of peril facing it.

By the end of the century a few influential people were beginning to realize that China would have to copy the West in fundamental matters, but they did not find their position popular; most Chinese who had an opinion of the foreigners detested them. This was partly a response to genuine injuries and slights suffered at the hand of the West, ranging from the Opium War down to incidents of petty racism. The Europeans showed a conspicuous lack of respect for Chinese law and the Chinese people. In Shanghai, the richest city in China, there was a public park for the exclusive use of Europeans. (There is dispute among historians as to whether there was actually a sign at the entrance stating that 'No Dogs or Chinese' were permitted in the park.)

But beyond such issues, which created much well-founded Chinese resentment, there were rumours attributing quite imaginary crimes to the foreigners. Many Chinese were convinced the Christian religion was based on black magic, and that Western missionaries were using Chinese children as victims in ritual involving human sacrifice. The notion that the Chinese should become students of Western culture seemed odd even to many of the more sophisticated Chinese; to those who believed the wilder of the anti-foreign rumours, it appeared positively obscene.

The Empress Dowager Cixi (Ts'u-hsi) dominated the imperial court. She had not been particularly powerful as the wife of an emperor, but when her husband died in 1861 and her five-year-old son inherited the throne, she was able to seize effective control of the government. When her son died some years later she arranged, in violation of the normal rules of succession, that the throne should go to a three-year-old boy who was her nephew, and she continued to rule in this young Emperor's name. Certainly she was intelligent and strong-willed. Otherwise she could hardly have dominated a society as male-centred as China for forty-seven years. However, she was also short-sighted, self-centred, and thoroughly ignorant of the Western world which posed such a threat to the country she ruled. She would not willingly support any drastic programme of reform or modernization.

Islands of modernization began to appear in some places, under the aegis of various Chinese officials. Regional leaders like Li Hongzhang not only tried to modernize the armed forces under their control, but sometimes went beyond to sponsor commercial enterprises – shipping lines, factories, and so on. However, the merchants who managed such enterprises were subjected to much interference from their political masters, and many of the enterprises suffered from corruption and nepotism.

A more vigorous and far-reaching form of westernization occurred in the treaty ports and in Hong Kong, where Western influence was strongest. Christian missionaries set up schools and colleges. Chinese businessmen not only learned foreign business techniques and technology, they were able to apply their knowledge in an environment far more friendly to commercial enterprise than that found in the bulk of China. The competition of Western business firms with superior financial resources was sometimes a problem, but on the other hand many Chinese businessmen were able to borrow operating capital, through intermediaries, from Western banks. In any case, foreign competition posed fewer problems than the extortionate bureaucrats of cities not under foreign control. Later nationalist scholars have looked down on the 'compradors', Chinese businessmen who acted as agents or partners of foreign merchants, but these people played an important role in introducing Western knowledge to their country.

Plate 2.1 The Empress Dowager Cixi.



Modern China

China had two great gateways to the outside world. One was Shanghai, at the mouth of the Yangzi, the headquarters for Western penetration of the huge Yangzi basin and economically the most important city in China.

The other was Guangdong province in the south, the first area that had been significantly influenced by Westerners. This was the province that sent by far the largest number of settlers overseas, to Indonesia, Malaya, and other Southeast Asian countries, and even to more distant lands like the United States. Many of these 'overseas Chinese' stayed in contact with relatives at home. Aside from having this huge network of informal contacts abroad, Guangdong was also host to the British colony of Hong Kong. The island of Hong Kong, at the mouth of the province's main river system, had been ceded to Britain in 1842. British Hong Kong had been expanded by the cession of a small area of the mainland opposite the island in 1860, and then by the British acquisition of a much larger area of the mainland, called the New Territories, on a 99-year lease in 1898.

It was a native of Guangdong named Kang Youwei (K'ang Yu-wei) who in 1898 gained the ear of the young Emperor and initiated the first major effort to modernize the central government of China. Kang was a Confucian scholar, but of a very innovative sort; he had reinterpreted the classics to make Confucius an advocate of reform and change rather than a preserver of tradition. Kang and the Emperor launched a remarkably broad campaign of reform and modernization. However, within a few weeks conservative elements at the court, led by the Empress Dowager, had regained control. The brief period of Kang's ascendancy was later known as the 'Hundred Days'. Kang fled abroad; other leading reformers were executed, and the Emperor spent the rest of his days as a prisoner of his aunt the Empress Dowager.

Western pressure increases

The final outburst of traditional Chinese xenophobia came in 1899. A group generally called the Boxers, basically a secret society, began attacking missionaries and foreigners in general. They claimed that the mysterious powers of Chinese martial arts could defeat the firearms of the foreigners and drive them out. The Boxers originally had anti-Manchu tendencies, but the Empress Dowager and the court, hating the foreigners and in any case fearing to antagonize the Boxers, decided to co-opt them and gave them a certain degree of support. The Boxers killed missionaries and Chinese Christians, and besieged the foreign legations in the capital of Beijing. The result was what might have been expected, given China's repeated defeats earlier in the nineteenth century. A joint force of the major Western powers plus Japan marched in, defeated the Boxers and the government army that had been half-heartedly supporting the Boxers in their attack on the foreign legations,



Plate 2.2 Public execution during the Boxer Rising. A Boxer is beheaded in front of European troops.

captured Beijing with much destruction and looting, and extracted a massive indemnity from the government.

Fortunately, the fighting was limited to the northern part of the country. Key provincial governors in central and southern China understood the power of the European far better than did the Empress Dowager; they ignored her decision to support the Boxers, and maintained the fiction that the Boxers were rebels against the Qing Dynasty. They were thus able to avoid becoming embroiled in the hostilities. Eventually the victorious Westerners also decided to accept this fiction, which is why books published in the West often refer to the whole affair as the 'Boxer Rebellion'. The Westerners did not want to destroy the dynasty, but simply to manipulate and exploit it, so they allowed it to save face by disavowing its erstwhile Boxer allies.

The competition among the imperialist powers for 'spheres of influence'

in China had become acute in the late 1890s. It seemed for a while that China might be reduced to colonial status. Within their spheres, the various powers' investments and commercial activities were usually backed up by control of communications, especially railroads, and by the presence of armed forces. China's helplessness was revealed during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5. Much of the fighting between Russia and Japan occurred within the borders of the Chinese Empire, in southern Manchuria, but the Chinese government remained an essentially passive spectator, and even issued a formal declaration of neutrality.

In the end China was not carved up; the spheres of influence did not become foreign colonies. Partly this was because China was too large for any one power to take, and for a foreign power to convert influence into full *de facto* rule was difficult, in any particular area, as long as there existed a Chinese national government lying outside the foreign power's sphere of influence. Partly it was because the various powers interfered with one another's ambitions. Complete control of an area by any of them would have implied locking out the others. The 'Open Door Policy', announced by the United States in 1899 and 1900, was the most formal statement of this principle. This policy ordained that the control exercised by foreign powers over their spheres of influence should not be carried to such a point that the commerce of other nations was excluded, or that the sphere of influence ceased to be a part of China. One should not overestimate the impact of this American policy. The USA was not prepared to enforce it, but only to declare a wish that other nations should obey its principles. Furthermore, even had it been enforced, it would not by any means have constituted a guarantee of Chinese independence. Chinese enthusiasm for the Open Door was limited; most Chinese, given a choice, would have preferred a closed door with the foreigners on the outside.

In the first years of the twentieth century, shaken by the disaster of the Boxer incident and by the scramble of the imperialist powers for concessions in China, the Qing Court finally took drastic steps to preserve China's independence. The court tried not only to negotiate an increase in tariff levels, but also to regain control of the Maritime Customs Service that collected those tariffs. It tried very hard to negotiate an end to foreign importation of opium into China. It began modifying the principle of extraterritoriality, under which Westerners in China were immune to Chinese law. It pushed effective administration into remote border areas to which it had previously never paid much attention, to make sure that they would not be nibbled away by the foreigners.

Even more important, the Qing Court embarked on a drastic programme of modernization and westernization within China. The traditional system of Civil Service examinations was abolished, and the education system was modified to take in Western knowledge. Provincial governments were ordered to select promising students for study abroad. Efforts were made to

modernize many military units. These 'New Armies' differed from the traditional units not only in their training and equipment, but also in that their soldiers were better educated, and came in many cases from fairly respectable backgrounds. Administrative structures were reorganized on Western lines, and the court even announced a plan to introduce constitutional government. Provincial assemblies were elected in 1909; the following year a National Assembly was convened, with half the members selected by the provincial assemblies and the other half chosen by the court.

These steps towards modernization, however, weakened the dynasty's political position rather than strengthened it. The Manchu ruling class had neither real enthusiasm for the changes that had been forced on it, nor great skill at carrying them out. It was not capable of carrying the westernization programme through to rapid and massive success; it is hard to see how any national leadership could have done so. The government's initial steps towards modernization drastically increased the number of people who expected rapid progress, and many of them turned against the dynasty when their expectations could not be met. Soldiers of the New Armies, because of their higher educational level, were much more receptive to revolutionary propaganda than the soldiers of traditional units had been.

Talk of constitutionalism inspired the provincial gentry to hope for a considerable expansion in their political power. Voting for the provincial assemblies had been limited to people of considerable wealth or education, and not surprisingly the gentry had emerged with control of these assemblies. Representatives of the gentry were then able to take control of the National Assembly also, despite the fact that half its members had been appointed by the Court. However, the provincial assemblies had been given only limited powers, and the National Assembly had not yet been given any real power. Members of the assemblies, and their supporters among the gentry, petitioned for the National Assembly to be converted into a genuine parliament, and were deeply offended when the court not only rejected the petitions but forbade further petitioning. Promises of constitutional government lost much of their credibility as conservative Manchu leaders at the court restricted the newly elected assemblies mainly to advisory functions. Indeed these leaders, increasingly worried about threats to their control of China, seemed to be tightening their grip on the government rather than loosening it.

Forty years earlier, during the suppression of the Taiping Rebellion, the court had allowed the rise of regional leaders like Li Hongzhang. These men, usually holding the title of provincial governor or governor-general, had their own armed forces backed up by substantial economic resources. They were entitled to most of the credit for whatever dynamism, and whatever capacity to learn from the West, the Qing government had possessed in the late nineteenth century. In the first years of the twentieth century there were two such great regional leaders. Zhang Zhidong (Chang Chih-tung), in Wuhan, controlled a vital territory in the heart of the Yangtze Valley. A younger man,

Yuan Shikai (Yuan Shih-k'ai), held what had formerly been Li Hongzhang's power base in the north. Yuan had built, and was steadily expanding, the most powerful of the New Armies.

Both Zhang and Yuan were removed from office in 1907. The court was trying to strengthen its position; it no longer wished to allow any regional official to be so powerful. However, the actual effect of this move was to weaken the government. Such great regional lords had been bulwarks of the dynasty for the past forty years. Zhang and Yuan had both played key roles in saving the Manchus from the consequences of their decision to support the Boxers against the Europeans a few years before. They possessed the greatest concentrations of power outside Beijing, and the court, following the long-standing Chinese tradition that the way to attain safety in politics is to break up potentially hostile concentrations of power, wished to be rid of them. However, if they had been allowed to remain they might have been very useful to the court in its efforts to control the other elements of the Chinese élite – lower ranking government officials, merchants, gentry, modern-style intellectuals, and officers of the New Armies. Most of these people had fewer ties to the national government, and far less sympathy for the problems it faced, than Zhang and Yuan. They had been growing stronger for decades; the creation of elected assemblies was about to give them a public forum, and help both to unify and to legitimize them.

The Revolution of 1911

The final collapse of the Qing Dynasty was to a considerable extent inspired by a revolutionary from Guangdong named Sun Yat-sen. He was a Methodist Christian who had travelled widely outside of China, had received much of his education in Hawaii and Hong Kong, and had been almost totally converted to Western ideas. He wanted to make China a republic on the European model. His belief in the easy conversion of one civilization to the practices of another was rather naïve, but he was able to build up a secret society called the Tongmenghui (T'ung Meng Hui, in English usually called the Revolutionary Alliance). Its optimistically vague programme called for overthrow of the Manchus, restoration of Chinese independence, establishment of a republican form of government, and development of a modern economy. Its membership remained small, and it was riven by factionalism. Much of Sun's financial support came from the Chinese communities in various foreign countries; dislike of the Manchus was a long-standing tradition among the overseas Chinese, and as a native of Guangdong, Sun was well qualified to establish contacts among them. Between 1906 and 1911, his followers failed in numerous armed uprisings against the Qing. None of these efforts drew in many participants, but the revolutionaries kept trying.

The final crisis began with a dispute over the control of China's railways. Many Chinese regarded foreign control of the railway network as one of the major threats to Chinese independence, and they had succeeded in having the right to build some key lines returned to Chinese ownership. These lines were intended to link the city of Wuhan, on the Yangzi River in Hubei province, with Guangdong in the South and with Siquan in the West. Members of the local gentry had then put up substantial amounts of capital for railroad construction. The amount raised, however, would not have been adequate even if properly managed, and much of it was dissipated through inefficiency and corruption. In 1911 the central government, which could see that financing and management organized on a provincial basis were not getting the lines built, and which did not care to see such vital facilities under provincial control in any case, obtained a foreign loan to pay for nationalization of the lines.

There was immediate rage in the provinces affected, both because the foreigners whose money was now paying for the railways seemed likely to emerge with ultimate control, and because those among the gentry who had already put in capital to begin construction were not being given what they regarded as fair compensation. In Sichuan province particularly, disorders and riots had escalated to outright rebellion by the autumn of 1911. The government moved in troops from neighbouring Hubei province, and rebellion then broke out there also.

Units of the New Armies in Wuhan (actually a collective name for three adjoining cities, one of which is the capital of Hubei province), had been heavily infiltrated by revolutionary organizations. The revolutionaries there called themselves a branch of the Tongmenghui, but they had in fact no contact with Sun Yat-sen and only a loose sort of liaison with some other Tongmenghui leaders. They had originally planned to spend a long time preparing for an uprising, but the crisis in Sichuan forced them to speed their schedule. Then the police arrested several of the ringleaders and captured a list of those involved in the plot. The remaining conspirators decided to move immediately, in however disorganized a fashion, rather than wait to be arrested in their turn.

No top leader of the revolutionary movement was in Wuhan, and many of the second-level leaders were in jail, so the rebels went to the highest ranking army officer they could catch, a colonel named Li Yuanhong (Li Yuan-hung), and forced him to accept the role of leader in the uprising. He had no previous record of sympathy for the revolutionary cause, and had to be threatened with execution before he agreed to take command of the movement, but he became more enthusiastic as it gained strength. (From this unlikely beginning, he rose over the next five years to become the nominal President of the Republic of China.) China was ripe for even such a weak and disorganized revolutionary movement as this. There was no effectively organized opposition in Wuhan, because both the commander of the armed forces

of the province and the head of the civil administration had fled in panic when the rebellion began. The successful uprising in Hubei quickly inspired imitation, and within a few weeks, revolutionaries of various sorts had taken much of central and southern China. A revolutionary government, established in the city of Nanjing about 300 miles down the Yangzi from Wuhan, elected Sun Yat-sen as its President.

The imperial court, in desperation, turned to Yuan Shikai. He had built the strongest army China then possessed, and he was now the best man the Manchus could think of to command this army, despite the way they had removed him from command four years before. Yuan extracted very broad powers from the court before accepting command. He then made a deal with the revolutionaries, under which he supported the conversion of China into a republic in return for being made its first President. The true weakness of the revolutionaries now revealed itself. The Manchus had fallen because they were weak, not because Sun Yat-sen or any other revolutionary leader was strong. The armies of the Qing Dynasty, now commanded by Yuan Shikai, controlled much of northern China. In many areas where the Qing had been overthrown, revolutionary regimes were led by members of the gentry, or army officers, who were not affiliated with the Tongmenghui and did not take Sun Yat-sen's orders. In Wuhan itself the Tongmenghui had little influence over the revolutionary government, and the main power struggle was that between the forces of Li Yuanhong and Yuan Shikai. Sun did not control China and saw no way he might obtain control; the best course available to him was to make a deal with General Yuan.

Yuan Shikai and the warlord era

The Republic of China operated on an *ad hoc* basis for about a year; an elected Parliament finally convened in February 1913. The most powerful party in it was the Guomindang or Nationalist Party, which was in large part derived from Sun's old Tongmenghui, reoriented and drastically expanded. Sun himself was no longer the central figure; he did not have the skills of a party politician, nor any great desire to acquire them. Sun took a nominal post in the Guomindang but devoted most of his attention to planning the development of China's railway network, while a man named Song Jiaoren (Sung Chiao-jen) became the effective head of the new party.

Unfortunately for the Guomindang, having control of Parliament did not confer control of China. The holders of real power, notably the military commanders, had little desire to submit to any elected body, and support for Parliament within Chinese society was not sufficiently massive to force the military to recognize its authority. The electorate had been much more broadly based than in the elections of 1909, but it had still been limited to a



Plate 2.3 Dr Sun Yat-sen. On 29 December 1911, those provinces which had declared independence from the Qing Dynasty met in Nanjing to prepare the establishment of a central government. At the same meeting Dr Sun Yat-sen was elected Provisional President.

minority of the population. Most Chinese had not been asked to vote for Parliament, and many were not even really aware of its existence.

Yuan Shikai took advantage of divisions in the Guomindang, and quickly established full control over the central government. In March 1913 Song Jiaoren was assassinated, probably at Yuan's instigation. Guomindang sympathizers in several central and southern provinces rebelled against Yuan in July, but were easily suppressed. At the end of the year Yuan outlawed the Guomindang, and in January of 1914 he dissolved Parliament. The political machine Song Yat-sen and Song Jiaoren had built was capable of winning elections, but it was not capable of forcing a man like Yuan Shikai to hold elections if he did not wish to. Even when Yuan overreached himself by assuming the title of Emperor, and then died in 1916, Sun Yat-sen could do little to influence events.

Yuan had never really been dictator of China; his control over most provincial governments had been too weak. When he died, central authority in China collapsed completely, and the country was divided up among various generals. China entered a decade of warlord rule. There continued to exist in theory a Republic of China, with a President and a Prime Minister in Beijing. It had one duty of real importance – handling China's relations with the foreigners. This gave it access to the customs receipts from the foreign-operated Maritime Customs Service, or at least to foreign loans for which the receipts were pledged as security. (In some years the customs receipts went entirely for debt payments.) It contained a certain number of capable officials who genuinely wanted to use their positions to promote the national welfare. However, over most of China it had no genuine control whatever. On the contrary, it often seemed little more than a pawn of whatever warlord or coalition of warlords controlled the city of Beijing.

Sun Yat-sen tried in 1917 to establish an alternative national government at Guangzhou, in his native province of Guangdong, and assemble under its banner an army capable of marching north and reunifying China. He was heavily dependent, however, on the forces of South China warlords of dubious loyalty. When they turned against him in 1918 he could not fight them; he ended up taking passage on a ship to Japan. He returned to Guangzhou in 1920, tried again, and once again saw key generals turn against him; by late 1922 he was on a ship headed for Shanghai.

For China as a culture the warlord era was one of great progress. Businessmen were taking over foreign production techniques, especially in the treaty ports where foreign influence was strongest. The First World War temporarily distracted the Europeans and allowed Chinese capitalists to make considerable strides, with much less competition from foreign imports. The new knowledge imported from the West was being assimilated, and significant numbers of Chinese were acquiring a steadily deeper understanding of it. Beijing and Shanghai were especially important as centres for the new learning. This trend was not an unminged blessing – by the late 1920s and



Plate 2.4 General Yuan Shikai, who became President of the Republic of China in 1912.

early 1930s, the colleges of China were turning out many graduates whose education had been so totally Western that they had little knowledge of or interest in the problems of their own society – but a substantial degree of modernization and westernization was necessary for China's survival.

For China as a nation the warlord period was a time of disaster. The upper classes, in general, lost much of their legitimacy. In the old order the core of the élite had been made up of educated men, who had acquired official status by a long and difficult course of study in history, philosophy, and classical literature. Their indoctrination had included many injunctions to care for the welfare of the common people. They had not always behaved in accord with the ideals in the works they had studied, but at least they had known that the Emperor would be annoyed with them if they abused the peasants so badly as to cause a revolt. In the warlord era almost all power was derived simply from the possession of money or military force.

A man could start out as a bandit, expand his force until he had effective control of a small area, and regularize the procedure by which he extracted wealth from the population until he could call it taxation instead of looting. He would then start to negotiate deals and alliances with the military forces in neighbouring areas. He could, in short, convert himself from a bandit to a minor warlord, and if he were sufficiently competent and lucky he might someday rule a province.

The central government no longer had either the will or the ability to protect the people against the rapaciousness of provincial élites. The poor suffered terribly, whether they were workers in the growing textile mills of Shanghai, or tenant farmers beset by landlords, tax-collectors, soldiers, and bandits.

Peace and order had been breaking down in the Chinese countryside for a long time; the Revolution of 1911 released a flood of violence. The struggles that began in 1911, most of which involved armies that were far from first-rate by world standards of the time, and in which bribery and intrigue often played a more important role than actual combat, can be described in comic-opera terms. There were extremely humorous incidents, including the cases of bandits who rose to warlord status, and Li Yuanhong being forced against his will to lead the rebellion of 1911 in Wuhan. There was nothing even faintly comic about the killing, however. People died by the hundreds of thousands, perhaps by the millions. Chinese rebels slaughtered Manchus. Soldiers of the Qing Dynasty, and later of the Republic of China and the various warlords, slaughtered rebels and people suspected of being rebels. Soldiers killed bandits or suspected bandits; the bandits killed those who got in their way. Warlord armies fought one another, seldom competently, but still with a substantial level of bloodshed, which increased over time as the armies expanded and their weaponry improved.

The collapse of central power naturally meant a collapse of Chinese control over Tibet, Xinjiang, and Outer Mongolia. Tibet and Xinjiang would

eventually be recovered; Outer Mongolia would be lost permanently. Shortly after the Revolution of 1911, the Tsarist government of Russia had forced Yuan Shikai to grant formal autonomy to Outer Mongolia, which became in effect a Russian protectorate. The Bolshevik (Communist) Revolution of 1917 in Russia was followed by civil warfare between Communist and anti-Communist forces in that country. In 1920, one of the anti-Communist Russian armies launched a bloody invasion of Mongolia. Some Mongols wishing to resist this invasion allied themselves with the Russian Communists. The outcome was the formal creation of the Mongolian People's Republic in 1924, which became the first satellite state of the Soviet Union.

What little progress China had made in combating foreign encroachment, in the last days of the Qing Dynasty, was reversed. Much of the country fell within the sphere of influence of one foreign power or another, and Western military forces were stationed rather widely within China to defend foreign interests. The Japanese were particularly aggressive. They declared war on Germany soon after the First World War began, moved into the German sphere of influence in Shandong province, and then demanded a substantial degree of control over China as a whole while the Europeans were distracted and unable to interfere. The 'Twenty-one Demands' which Japan presented to Yuan Shikai in January 1915 called not only for Japanese influence over very broad areas of China, but also for the presence of Japanese advisers in several crucial branches of the Chinese government including the police. The Japanese cannot have seen much that was extraordinary in their demands; this was the way the Great Powers had been treating less developed countries for many years. However, Japan's policy was understandably offensive to Chinese public opinion. Yuan Shikai, despite a tremendous public outcry, did not have the power to resist very effectively. He rejected the demand for Japanese advisers to the Chinese police, but gave in on most other issues. The last straw for China came at the peace conference after the war. The Chinese, who had declared war on Germany and had made some minor contributions to the war effort, had expected that in accord with Wilson's Fourteen Points they would obtain more independence and respect after the war, or at least that the German sphere of influence in Shandong would be returned to Chinese control. But the Versailles Treaty left the question of Shandong unsettled (in other words left the Japanese in control), and many of the other Chinese requests never even got on to the agenda of the conference.

The May Fourth Movement

In the nineteenth century, resistance against foreign incursions had usually taken the form of simple xenophobia; the Chinese had expressed a general

distaste for things European and had wanted the foreigners to go away. By the end of the First World War a more modern style of nationalism was spreading, phrased in Western terms and concentrated among the most westernized elements of the population. When protests broke out in May 1919 against the lack of consideration for Chinese interests in the Versailles Treaty, and especially against Chinese officials who accepted foreign encroachment on China, the students and faculty at Beijing University played a major role. The period of ferment known as the May Fourth Movement, which took its name from these demonstrations, included not only political protest but also literary and scientific developments involving considerable importation of Western ideas.

The concept of democracy gained in popularity among the intellectuals, both because of its inherent attractiveness and because they were aware that the most successful Western powers had been moving towards elected government during recent decades. In some aspects of life Western notions of equality went beyond the stage of being mere ideas for discussion, and began actually to be put into practice. The status of women rose; a small but increasing proportion of them obtained formal education, and the custom of foot-binding began to decline. Major intellectual figures began writing in a language much closer to that spoken by the common people, thus bringing closer the day when their writings could be read by a mass audience. Within a few years modern Mandarin, a North Chinese dialect spoken as a mother tongue by a large portion of the Chinese population, and not too difficult for speakers of other dialects to learn, replaced the fantastically difficult classical language as the medium of communication for educated people. This shift in language made mass education far easier than it could have been before, thus reducing the difficulty both of modern economic development and of creating a more equal society. Less than fifteen years before, the imperial government (thinking in terms of education in classical Chinese) had regarded raising the national literacy rate to 5 per cent as a goal that would take several years to accomplish. Much of the new literature combined artistic quality with a strong concern for social issues. Lu Xun (Lu Hsun), one of the most highly regarded authors, had been trained as a doctor, but he abandoned medicine, explaining that he wanted to treat the ills of society as a whole through literature rather than treating physical ills one patient at a time.

The movement towards greater equality was more important than many of the intellectuals may have realized. The Chinese élite through all its history had been a thin stratum, arrogantly convinced of its own superiority, ruling over a great mass of relatively uneducated peasants. The bulk of the population, even in 1919, had hardly been touched by the currents of modernization, and endured a level of poverty which the citizens of modern industrial societies can barely imagine. The economic modernization and industrialization China needed could not be carried out on such a basis. A technologically oriented society cannot be built or operated simply by a few

leaders and experts; it requires informed participation, at the very least, from a large proportion of the citizenry. An élite wishing to lead China into the twentieth century, to lead what is usually called a 'nationalist' revolution, could not succeed if it cut itself off from the masses in the way its predecessors had done. The question of just how far egalitarianism should be pushed has been a matter of intense dispute up to the present day, but there can be little doubt that Chinese society needed to become much more egalitarian than it was.