

Post-imperial Emperors?

Traditional Chinese Political Culture and Its Afterlife

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From the generations of the old, multiple states were extinguished in All under Heaven, but the Way of the ruler did not decline: this is because it benefits All under Heaven. (*Lüshi chunqiu*, ca. 240 BCE)

When we speak of the progress of dictatorial politics and its perfection, none of the myriad states in the world can be compared with our Central State [China]. In myriad other matters we do not advance; the only advance we have is that of dictatorial politics. (Liang Qichao 1902)

The encounter with modernity – which usually meant an encounter with the overwhelming power of Occidental imperialism – was a painful experience for most Asian countries. Almost invariably it engendered deep sociopolitical and cultural transformation of a “premodern” polity and rupture with indigenous cultural and political tradition. Yet as S.N. Eisenstadt observed in his seminal article “Multiple Modernities,” this encounter gave rise to “multiple institutional and ideological patterns Such patterns were distinctively modern, though greatly influenced by specific cultural premises, traditions, and historical experience” (Eisenstadt 2000:2).

Of manifold examples that demonstrate Eisenstadt’s insight, the case of China appears as one of the most interesting. Nowhere was the rupture with the past so visible, the breakdown of the traditional order so rapid, and the transformation so radical as in China. Throughout the twentieth century the country underwent a series of profound – and often bloody – revolutions that shattered its sociopolitical and cultural foundations to an extent

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unparalleled in Asia or anywhere else. And yet, its tremendous transformation notwithstanding, the country continued to be deeply influenced by indigenous political tradition that shaped its development trajectory even when it opted for radical modernization and a breakaway from the past.

The twentieth century was the stormiest in China's long history, but back in 1900 China looked to be a most unlikely candidate to become Asia's first republic and the hotbed of continuous revolutions. Its political structure was still maintained according to the basic principles adopted at the dawn of its imperial history, in the aftermath of the first imperial unification in 221 BCE. The empire was not stagnant to be sure; during twenty-one centuries of its history it underwent tremendous changes in demography and topography, in ethnic composition of the ruling elites and socioeconomic structure, in religion and means of artistic expression. It encountered – like any other comparable polity worldwide – periods of internal wars and foreign incursions, alien occupations, periodic disintegration, and devastating rebellions. Yet upheavals and transformations notwithstanding, there were striking continuities in institutional, sociopolitical, and cultural spheres throughout the imperial millennia. The monarchic political system; the powerful bureaucracy; the strongly pronounced social hierarchy, usually coupled with considerable social mobility; the extended family system; the uniform written language and continuous educational curriculum: these remained valid both under unifying dynasties and under regional regimes during the ages of fragmentation; under both native and alien rule. Moreover, underlying these common features were fundamental ideas and values that shaped the imperial polity. The emperor should be omnipotent and his rule should be universal; the bureaucracy should be staffed by men of proven talent and merit; and the commoners deserve the utmost concern but should remain outside policy making. These ideas guided political actors in China from the beginning to the end of the imperial enterprise, from the Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE) to the Qing (1636/1644–1912).

Throughout the centuries, the imperial system demonstrated remarkable adaptability to a variety of domestic and foreign challenges. This was particularly true under the last imperial dynasty, the Qing, established by the Manchu (Manju) conquerors. The Qing rulers were fully aware of manifold troubles that plagued previous dynasties – either alien or native ones – and did their best to avoid the mistakes of their predecessors. Blessed by a sequence of highly capable emperors, the Qing regime achieved the true peak of peace and prosperity in the eighteenth century. By the nineteenth century, though, the situation had changed profoundly. A combination of

domestic crises brought about by an unprecedented demographic expansion, and encroachment by militarily and economically superior Western powers (later joined by Japan), shattered the empire's foundations. Yet the empire's leaders refused to change their ways. Fearing the loss of stability, they limited changes in response to internal and external challenges to an absolute minimum, staunchly refusing to deviate from the regime's foundational principles. In 1900, China appeared to be the world's most conservative regime.

Then everything began to change with astonishing speed. As internal and external disasters followed one after another, calls for radical changes ensued; republican ideas, unheard of before 1900, suddenly gained popularity; and within just a few years, in 1911/1912, the dynasty collapsed and with it the millennia-old political order. Some of the details of these events will be discussed below; what is important here is the magnitude and rapidity of change. Not only was the emperorship abolished; gone forever – and almost immediately – were its cultural attributes, such as the official religion, centered around the imperial worship of Heaven and the officials' worship of local deities; gone was the sophisticated ritual system that upheld the social hierarchy; gone were the systems of ranks and privileges; gone was the traditional educational curriculum. In just a few years, entirely new modes of political participation and political life ensued; the traditional family system with its embedded gender inequality was profoundly shattered; and even the mode of written communications changed when the three millennia-old classical language was replaced with the colloquial one. In less than one generation, China's sociopolitical and cultural life had changed more profoundly than during the preceding two odd millennia.

China's embrace of modernity appeared to many observers – domestic and foreign alike – as resolute and unequivocal. As time passed, though, perceptive scholars noticed the lasting impact of China's indigenous cultural traditions beneath the veneer of total renovation. The unidirectional narrative of the *Rise of Modern China* (Hsü [1970] 1999) gave place to a more nuanced story of the ongoing *Search for Modern China* (Spence 1999); the dissociation with the past was no longer perceived as a total rupture. Nowadays, in China itself views of the country's history and cultural traditions are changing from critical toward approving, and some scholars even speak of a "Confucian revival" (e.g., Hammond and Richey 2015). It is all the more tempting, then, to assess the country's trajectory anew. As ideological cleavages that marred perceptions of Chinese history until recently are receding, it is possible to reevaluate China's fluctuations among

different types of “modernity” and the role of native traditions behind these fluctuations.

This essay will focus on just one aspect of the interaction between the past and the present in China’s path into the twentieth century – namely, the fate of its monarchic system. As I shall show, this system was at the core of the traditional Chinese political order; hence its abolition in 1911/1912 should be considered the singularly significant change in China’s evolving “modernization.” Yet the sudden abandonment of one of the most elaborate political systems in human history came at a huge cost, prompting repeated attempts to restore aspects of the monarchic mode of rule under the republican regimes. The ups and downs in China’s disengagement from monarchy can serve as a convenient means of tracing the route of one of the paradigmatic “axial civilizations” (Eisenstadt 1986:291–373) into its peculiar modernity. Through tracing the vicissitudes of what I term China’s “post-monarchic monarchism,” I hope to shed more light on the complex dialectics between continuity and change in China’s twentieth-century trajectory.

BACKGROUND: CHINA’S MONARCHISM

From the earliest stages of its known history, China (and multiple regional polities that existed within the territory commonly identified as “China proper”) was invariably ruled by monarchs. As both epigraphs at the beginning of this chapter – the first was written on the eve of the establishment of the Chinese empire in 221 BCE, while the second was penned just a few years before the empire’s collapse – indicate, monarchic power was considered the core of traditional Chinese political culture by either staunch supporters of monarchism or its modern critics. Throughout the two odd millennia that separate the dates of the two epigraphs, China was ruled by an immense variety of individuals: dreadful tyrants and weaklings, capable autocrats and mediocrities. Almost every single emperor was bitterly criticized by his underlings, and his inadequacy mercilessly exposed by subsequent historians, but the fundamental idea of monarchic rule as the singularly acceptable form of government had not been questioned. It is not surprising, then, that many leading historians (e.g., Liu Zehua 2000) consider monarchism as a quintessential feature of Chinese political culture.

The power of monarchism in China derived not just from its historical roots, but primarily from the fact that it was almost unanimously endorsed

by the thinkers of the Warring States period (Zhanguo 453–221 BCE). As the name suggests, the Warring States period was an age of bloody struggle among competing polities; yet it was also the time of exceptional intellectual flowering, the age of bold departures and remarkable ideological pluralism, unhindered by either political or religious orthodoxies. Thinkers of what is often dubbed the “Hundred Schools of Thought” competed freely for the rulers’ patronage, moving from one court to another in search of better employment. They proposed distinct remedies to social, political, economic, and military maladies, their views moving from harsh authoritarianism to anarchistic individualism, from support of *laissez-faire* economy to advocacy of state monopolies, from blatant militarism to radical pacifism. Yet this immense pluralism notwithstanding, the competing thinkers held certain things in common. Among these, two major ideas had the most profound impact on Chinese political culture. One is that the only feasible way to end persistent warfare is to unify the entire subcelestial realm, “All-under-Heaven” (*tianxia*), under a single rule (Pines 2000). Second, and more pertinent to our discussion, is that this unified realm should be ruled by an omnipotent monarch. There cannot be peace without unity, and there can be no unity without a Unifier.

The idea that “stability is in unity” (*Mengzi* 1.6) appears a reasonable choice of the thinkers, given the bitter experience of ever escalating military conflicts in their world and the proven inadequacy of diplomatic means of stabilizing interstate relations (Pines 2000); but why does this unity presuppose monarchic form of rule? The answer may be related to the accumulated experience of the preceding Springs-and-Autumns (Chunqiu 771–453 BCE) period, China’s aristocratic age. This was the age of woeful sociopolitical turmoil. First, the nominal rulers of the realm, the “Sons of Heaven” of the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE), lost their power to their underlings, the regional lords, who became fully independent potentates; then these lords in turn were eclipsed by powerful aristocrats in their domains. The devolution of the rulers’ power first in the Zhou realm in general and then in its component polities brought about a prolonged age of war of all against all and accelerating political disintegration (Pines 2002). The Warring States period, in contrast, was marked by the reversal of this trend: politically this meant formation of the “ruler-centered” territorial states, which became the building blocks of the future empire (Lewis 1999); ideologically this meant endorsement of the idea of an omnipotent monarch as the only remedy for political chaos. One of the eminent thinkers of that age, Shen Dao (fl. late fourth century BCE) summarized:

In antiquity, the Son of Heaven was established and esteemed not in order to benefit the single person. It is said: When All under Heaven lack the single esteemed [person], then there is no way to carry out the principles [of orderly government, *li* 理], carrying out the principles is done for the sake of All under Heaven. Hence, the Son of Heaven is established for the sake of All under Heaven, it is not that All under Heaven is established for the sake of the Son of Heaven; a ruler of a state is established for the sake of the state, it is not that the state is established for the sake of the ruler of the state; a head of officials is established for the sake of officials, it is not that officials are established for the sake of the head of officials. Even if the law is bad, it is better than absence of laws; therewith the hearts of the people are unified. (*Shenzi*, “Wei de,” 16–18)

Shen Dao states with utmost clarity: the ruler – either in an individual state or in the entire subcelestial realm – is crucial for the proper functioning of the political system; he is the real foundation of the proper order; not a beneficiary but rather a servant of humankind. Just as bad laws are preferable to a lawless situation, a bad ruler is better than anarchy. The ruler’s mere existence is the fundamental need of human society; his personal qualities are of secondary importance. This latter point would remain highly controversial, but Shen Dao’s basic message regarding the ruler’s indispensability for the polity’s proper functioning would not. Chinese intellectuals of different ideological affiliations were equally committed to bolstering the ruler’s authority and providing it with ideological rationalizations (Pines 2009:25–53).

To be sure, Shen Dao’s rationalization of the monarchic rule was just one of manifold layers of ideology and practice of monarchism that accrued during the three odd millennia of China’s known history. These layers were comprised of, among others, religious justifications for the monarch’s rule as representing the will of the supreme deity, Heaven; idealistic expectations of the ruler to be the moral leader and rectifier of humankind; metaphysical and philosophical stipulations for the principle of monarchic rule, and the like. These intertwined and mutually reinforcing ideas, coupled with effusive imperial pageantry of later ages, and protected by the monarchy’s coercive power created an almost unassailable ideological construct, which, by the end of China’s lengthy imperial age, became so entrenched in the people’s minds that its underlying political reasons became hardly noticeable. That the monarchy became sacrosanct in the eyes of the vast

majority of political actors in China and among its immediate neighbors is undeniable. Yet beneath the layers of its sacralization, Chinese monarchy was also – perhaps primarily – the result of a reasonable choice of the Warring States’ period thinkers and their imperial period heirs. Shen Dao and others like him came to a uniform conclusion: without a single locus of supreme power, society will face disintegration. As Xunzi (ca. 310–230 BCE), arguably China’s most sophisticated political thinker, emphasized: the very possibility of humans to form a viable collective depends on the existence of the ruler.¹ And the ruler, by the mere singularity of his power, ensures proper order. Multiple texts of the Warring States period reiterate: “oneness [of the ruler] brings orderly rule; doubleness brings chaos.”²

The almost unanimous consensus in favor of a strictly monarchic form of rule achieved during the most pluralistic and innovative period in the history of Chinese political thought explains the hegemonic power of the ideology of monarchism throughout the subsequent imperial millennia. Yet it should be immediately recalled that thinkers of the Warring States period were by no means sycophants of the current rulers. On the contrary, they were bitterly critical of the rulers’ inadequacies and were ready to criticize contemporary sovereigns as benighted mediocrities. They overwhelmingly considered “the people” (i.e., the commoners) the “root” or the “foundation” of the polity, whose well-being should be the primary criterion of the ruler’s appropriate performance. Many thinkers considered themselves intellectually and morally superior to the rulers: teachers and not just subjects of the monarchs.³ Yet none of the proponents of these ideas – not even the authors of iconoclastic *Zhuangzi* (composed ca. 300–220 BCE), who derided all the rulers, past and present, as bloodthirsty tyrants – posed any alternative to the monarchic form of rule.⁴ Nor did any of them propose institutional limitations on monarchic power. An individual ruler could – and should – be criticized; he was encouraged to consult his meritorious aides and heed their opinion; yet his was the final say on any matter of importance. A remonstrator and a dissenter could possess a high moral ground, but they had no administrative means of annulling the ruler’s order. From this

1 Xunzi, “Wang zhi” V.9:165. For Xunzi’s thought, see, e.g., Goldin 1999; Sato 2003.

2 *Lüshi chunqiu*, “Zhi yi” 17.8:1132. See also *Guanzi*, “Qi chen qi zhu” XVII.52:998–999; *Shenzi* “De li,” 48; *Xunzi*, “Wang ba” VII.11:223–224; *Han Feizi*, “Er bing” II.7:39–43.

3 For the “people as a root” principle, and for the intellectuals’ haughty stance vis-à-vis the rulers, see Pines 2009:187–214 and 163–180 respectively.

4 See, e.g., *Zhuangzi*, “Dao Zhi,” 778–779; “Qu qie,” 252–256.

perspective, the power of Chinese monarchs was indeed limitless, and it had clear despotic potential, which was at times fully realized.

The above discussion outlines major tensions that permeated the theory and practice of monarchic rule for millennia to come. On the one hand, thinkers insisted on preserving “a single esteemed” person in the realm; on the other hand, they were fully aware of the pitfalls of the system of individual rule and sought ways of limiting its excesses. The major problem, *pace* common views of modern opponents of authoritarianism, was not necessarily the emergence of bloodthirsty tyrants: first, because their appearance was infrequent, and, second, because Chinese political tradition developed ways of dealing with them by legitimating their overthrow (Pines 2008). The real problem was a mediocrity on the throne. It was tacitly understood that the prevailing dynastic principle of ascending the throne was prone to produce less than brilliant individuals. In the age of the Warring States, in particular, as a meritocratic system of entry into officialdom replaced the pedigree-based aristocratic order (Pines 2013), the rulers remained the only executives who owed their position exclusively to their rights of birth and not to their abilities.⁵ Practically, this meant that officials who served the ruler were frequently intellectually and morally superior to their master. How to settle this contradiction between political and intellectual authority became the most formidable challenge to adherents of the monarchic form of rule.

The intrinsic contradiction between the thinkers’ belief in the monarchic form of rule as singularly appropriate and their low expectations of individual rulers generated persistent tensions throughout Chinese history, both on a philosophical level (Graziani 2015) and in terms of practical solutions (Pines 2012: 44–75). Ideally, thinkers hoped for the coming of the True Monarch, a semi-divinized sage (Puett 2002), who would stand at the apex of the moral and intellectual and not just political pyramid. This sage ruler was conceived as an exceptional, quasi-messianic personality, one who arrives “once in five hundred years” (*Mengzi* 4.13), and under whose rule uniform compliance will be the norm.⁶ Yet insofar as the True Monarch

5 For attempts to circumvent the system of hereditary succession and for their ultimate failure, see Pines 2005.

6 Xunzi, for instance, unequivocally explained that when the sage occupies the throne “one who unites with him is right, one who differs from him is wrong” (*Xunzi*, “Zheng lun” XII.18:331). This promise of total obedience is significant when it is voiced by a thinker who unequivocally defended the minister’s right to disobey an average ruler (*Xunzi*, “Chen Dao” IX.13:249).

did not materialize, the solution accepted by most thinkers, and duly implemented by the imperial statesmen, was to preserve the symbolic power at the monarch's hands, while dissuading him from actively intervening in policy-making. This latter goal was achieved through a combination of moral suasion – e.g., convincing the monarch that overburdening himself with multiple tasks would be damaging both to his health and to administrative efficiency – and through a subtle and yet efficient system of “checks and balances” that directed all but the most strong-willed monarchs toward collegial ways of decision-making and relegation of power to the ministers.

The solution to the problem of monarchic activism was not a neat one, because it ultimately required a cooperative monarch. Not every ruler in Chinese history was satisfied with nominal superiority, though. Thus, the First Emperor of Qin (r. 221–210 BCE), the first unifier of “All-under-Heaven,” duly proclaimed himself a True Monarch and a sage, and consequently demanded absolute obedience from his subjects (Pines 2014). Henceforth, emperors were routinely identified as “sages” (Liu Zehua 2014a, 2015), and although more often than not it was tacitly understood that their sagacity is fictitious, some took it seriously and tried to impose their will on any imaginable sphere of their subjects' lives.⁷ Surely, these occupants of the Dragon Throne could fully realize the despotic potential of their office. Yet from a long perspective one can estimate that despots were the exception rather than the rule.

Careful analysis of the patterns of the emperors' activism through any major dynasty shows its inevitable decrease as the dynasty progressed. In part this was a result of the literati's monopoly on the future emperor's education and their consequent ability to dissuade future monarchs from whimsical rule. But perhaps more significantly, the sheer magnitude of administrative and ceremonial tasks of the emperor was simply too huge to be dealt with by any save a few exceptionally gifted monarchs. Administratively, the monarch was supposed to make all the important decisions in any imaginable realm: from personnel matters to financial issues, from revision of death verdicts to promotion of a minor deity,⁸ from military and diplomatic affairs to drafting examination questions. To these one should add multiple ceremonial tasks that increased so much by the late imperial

7 See, for instance, the case of Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398, reigned as Ming Taizu, 1368–1398) as depicted in Dardess 1983; Langlois 1988.

8 As a reminder, Chinese emperors were superior to all the deities (whom they could promote or demote), except for the supreme deity, Heaven.

period that “even with the best of intentions, it was virtually impossible for an emperor to carry out all the prescribed rituals” (Rawski 1998: 212–213). It seems reasonable to suggest that this concentration of tasks in the emperor’s hands was not just a by-product of the emperors’ insatiable quest for power, but also an astute bureaucratic ploy. Like Sir Humphrey Appleby from *Yes, Minister*, by overburdening the ruler the bureaucrats were effectively disempowering him. Thus, aside from a few workaholic sovereigns, for most Chinese emperors the default choice was relegation of power to the ministers and rubberstamping their proposals.⁹

In retrospect it seems that the emperor’s position in traditional China was a curious mix of institutional indispensability and personal insignificance. As an institution, the emperor’s role was crucial: as the single legitimate locus of power, he had the ability to guarantee tolerable functioning of the huge realm, in which every human being – from independent-minded literati to awesome generals, from proud tribal chiefs to the humblest peasants – had to revere the emperor and to accept his explicit will, since doing otherwise meant open rebellion and could have the gravest of consequences. Yet individually speaking, most monarchs were sidelined by their underlings, rubberstamping the submitted documents and being satisfied with their largely ceremonial role. This deactivation and partial depersonalization of the ruler was a good antidote against whimsical tyranny; but it came at a price. At times of emergency, when radical and bold decisions had to be made, many monarchs, especially those raised within the palace without real administrative or military knowledge of their realm, procrastinated, being unable to firmly navigate their country amid conflicting policy proposals. This was exactly the case of the Qing dynasty. While at its beginning the dynasty was blessed with a series of exceptionally gifted, assertive, and intelligent rulers, by the nineteenth century it entered what appears to be a routine dynastic decline, with a series of inept rulers who failed to adequately respond to the Western and later Japanese challenge. *Pace* Liang Qichao (2nd epigraph), late imperial China’s malady was not

9 I discuss this process of the emperor’s “deactivation” in Pines 2012:63–69; the best study in my eyes that explains the mechanism of this deactivation is Huang 1981. For the Kangxi Emperor’s (1661–1722) complaint about the heavy burden of his tasks, see Spence 1974:146–147. Han Fei (d. 233 BCE), arguably the staunchest supporter of monarchism and among the most astute observers of its shortcomings (Graziani 2015), notices how a scheming minister caused the ruler to over-engage himself in administrative routine, completely disempowering him (*Han Feizi*, “Wai chu shuo you xia” XIV.35:343–344).

autocracy but atrophy of rulership. This was the background for what would prove to be the most profound change in China's history.

THE COLLAPSE OF THE EMPIRE

In 1898, China's situation appeared most precarious. It survived, albeit badly battered, a series of domestic uprisings and foreign aggressive wars (the so-called Opium Wars, 1839–1860), but now things changed for the worse. In 1895 the Qing were soundly beaten by the rising Japanese Empire, a defeat that brought about not just woeful humiliation, but also huge indemnities and painful territorial concessions. Seeing the empire's weakness, Western powers imposed on the Qing court a series of harsh demands for economic and political rights in parts of China, starting the “scramble for concessions,” which effectively reduced China's sovereignty in some of the economically most advanced parts of the country. The resultant sense of emergency explains the willingness of the young Guangxu Emperor (r. 1875–1908) to boldly embrace the reformists' faction: a group of young literati, who promised to reinvigorate the monarchy much as was done in Japan in the aftermath of the Meiji Restoration of 1868. During the three months of the reformists' power they launched over a hundred different initiatives, most of which angered and alienated the conservative opposition at court and in the country in general. Finally, Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908), who had nominally yielded her power to the Guangxu Emperor in 1889 but remained a singularly influential power-broker, decided to act: the young emperor was put under house arrest, reformers fled abroad or were executed, and the pendulum shifted decisively in the direction of conservatism (Kwong 1984, for further details).

It is most remarkable in retrospect that even as late as 1898 the principle of monarchism was not questioned yet. Peter Zarrow, in an important recent study of China's transformation from a monarchy into a republic, analyzes intellectual trends that “desacralized” the monarchy, contributing to its eventual collapse (Zarrow 2012). Zarrow's analysis is pertinent, but all too often he reads criticism of the monarchy in the late Qing dynasty through the prism of eventual abolition of monarchic rule rather than in the broader context of traditional Chinese political discourse. Actually, radical criticism of monarchic despotism, calls for a collegial mode of rule, derision of the dynastic principle of power transfer, and even the idea that the people are the true “masters” of the polity – all can be traced to the earliest layers of

traditional Chinese political discourse (Pines 2009). It is true that in the late nineteenth century these ideas were resurrected primarily because they resonated with Western political ideas already introduced to some of the imperial literati, but they still did not pose a direct threat to the monarchic order. Even if the monarchy was losing its sacral aura, until the very end of the nineteenth century there was still no search for radical alternatives. The idea of constitutional monarchy on a par with that of Germany and Japan was mulled already, even if in a muted form, but republicanism remained an alien term.

This said, the seeds of change were already sown. As more Chinese became exposed to Western ideas – either through the interaction with foreigners in the so-called treaty ports, or due to the activities of the missionaries, or thanks to the increased volume of translations from Western languages – these contacts brought about profound reconsideration of many previously unshakeable truths. Most importantly, Western narratives of “progress” and “modernization” began entering China and eroding the prevalent belief in the overall importance of preserving sociopolitical stability as the primary measure of the government’s success. Change and reforms were no longer viewed negatively; and while most statesmen and thinkers of the late nineteenth century were interested for the most part in the military and economic achievements of the West, others began pondering the advantages of Western political structures. Nonetheless, the hegemonic position of the imperial political culture built around the pivotal figure of the emperor as the sole guarantor of political order had not been shaken yet. Hence, the reformist leaders of 1898, most notably Kang Youwei (1858–1927), considered a powerful monarch an asset rather than a liability for their plans to radically restructure Chinese society. While the ideas of Kang and of his disciple, Liang Qichao (1873–1929), were eventually conducive toward the erosion of the monarchy’s legitimacy, in the short term they did not plan to dismantle it but rather to improve its functioning (Zarrow 2012:24–88).

In the final account, rapid unraveling of the monarchic order in the beginning of the twentieth century appears more as a matter of contingency than of long-term trends (compare Zarrow 2012:17). Since 1861 the imperial authority had bifurcated between the powerful dowager, Cixi, and the puppet emperors she controlled, which contributed toward the erosion of the throne’s legitimacy (Bastid 1987). The empire’s disastrous performance vis-à-vis external enemies aggravated the sense of its leaders’ inadequacy. Then the real disaster struck. In May-June 1900, the ill-advised Qing court became engulfed in mass anti-Christian and anti-Western

activities, the “Boxer Uprising” or the “Boxer War.” The war, which broke out almost accidentally (Xiang 2003), had exposed the full extent of the empire’s weaknesses. The imperial forces were easily smashed by superior Western armies; the Empress Dowager and her captive Guangxu Emperor had to flee deep into China’s hinterland; the imperial capital and its palaces were occupied and sacked by the allied troops of eight Western countries (including Japan); and China was forced to sign a humiliating Boxer Protocol (1901), which dealt an extremely painful blow to the dynasty’s prestige. Worse, during the “war,” most provincial governors refused to support the dynasty, thereby indicating the critical loss of its ability to govern. The woeful ineptitude of the Empress Dowager and of the Manchu court in general was now self-evident.

It is under these exceptional circumstances that a clear anti-monarchic ideology was first voiced on Chinese soil by a Chinese man. A young student, Zou Rong (1885–1905), had published his pamphlet, *The Revolutionary Army* (*Geming jun*) in 1903, saying there, among other things:

Sweep away millennia of despotism in all its forms, throw off millennia of slavishness, annihilate the five million and more of the furry and horned Manchu race, cleanse ourselves of 260 years of harsh and unremitting pain, so that the soil of the Chinese subcontinent is made immaculate, and the descendants of the Yellow Emperor will all become Washingtons

The yellow and white races which are to be found on the globe have been endowed by nature with intelligence and fighting capacity. They are fundamentally incapable of giving way to each other. Hence, glowering and poised for a fight they have engaged in battle in the world of evolution, the great arena where strength and intelligence have clashed since earliest times, the great theater where for so long natural selection and progress have been played out

With the rapid advances in science, the superstitious doctrine whereby a man becomes an emperor through the gift of heaven and the spirits can be destroyed. With the rapid advance in world civilization, the system whereby the rule of a single man in a despotic form of government can cover the whole country may be overthrown. With the rapid advances in wisdom, everybody will be able to enjoy his or her natural rights.¹⁰

10 Translation from Lust 1968; cited from <http://archive.li/dnU7> (accessed 26 April, 2017).

Zou Rong's pamphlet is indicative of an entirely new discourse that began proliferating in China in an age of profound political and ideological confusion. Superficial invocations of social Darwinism, of "science," of "human rights," and so on, are reflective of the sudden appeal of these alien concepts for the Chinese public; and so is a surprising elevation of Washington to the position of supreme paragon, on a par with the legendary Yellow Emperor. This new discourse allowed Zou not just to abuse the Manchu rulers of China (the inflammatory and bloodthirsty tone in itself was acceptable whenever anti-dynasty rebels issued their call for arms), but more significantly, to denigrate hereditary monarchy as yet another superstition that will be destroyed "with the rapid advances in science." All these *topoi* were introduced to the Chinese public by a young and heretofore unknown man, whose only credentials were one year of studies in Japan. Yet what is amazing in *The Revolutionary Army* is not its shallowness, nor its blatant racism, nor its inflammatory tone, but rather its huge success: despite being banned, it sold an unimaginable one million copies, becoming one of the major bestsellers of the late imperial period, and gaining endorsement of some of the established intellectuals, such as Zhang Binglin (1868–1936).¹¹

Zou Rong's assault on "the superstitious doctrine whereby a man becomes an emperor through the gift of heaven and the spirits" may be the first instance of a publication on Chinese soil that clearly articulated abandonment of the monarchic principle of rule; however, similar sentiments were voiced previously by a veteran exile revolutionary and the would-be "Father of the Nation," Dr. Sun Yat-sen (Sun Zhongshan, 1866–1925). Already in his first revolutionary organization, The Society for Revival of China (*Xing Zhong hui*, established in 1894 in exile in the US), Sun called for "collective government" (*hezong zhengfu*); and in the next few years he referred infrequently to the possibility of establishing a republican form of government. Yet only by 1903 did this goal gain prominence in his thoughts. In 1905, in polemics with the reformist wing of anti-Qing opposition in exile in Japan, Sun argued that the republican form of government is more advanced than constitutional monarchy, and therefore should be prioritized (Bastid-Bruguière 1994; Schiffrin 1968:317–319). Sun duly became the staunchest republican in the anti-Qing camp.

That said, in the cases of both Zou Rong and Sun Yat-sen anti-monarchic slogans were submerged by the much more strongly pronounced assault on

11 For the success of *The Revolutionary Army*, see Schiffrin 1968:273–274; for Zhang Binglin's career, see, e.g., Laitinen 1990; Shimada 1990.

the Manchus as alien and hence illegitimate rulers of China. As such, both revolutionaries were acting well within the parameters of earlier anti-Manchu rebellious groups, who vehemently attacked the ruling dynasty, but that were by no means republican (e.g., the Taiping rebels, 1850–1864). Zou Rong died of illness in prison and we cannot guess whether or not his nascent republicanism would have developed into a more coherent doctrine. In Sun Yat-sen's case the evolution of republican ideas is undeniable, yet as Marianne Bastid-Bruguère (1994:210) observes, "the content and meaning he put in this [republican] idea were never spelled out by him in a comprehensive way before the 1911 Revolution." The republican idea remained a vague promise of a fairer, more effective, and more "modern" form of rule, but its advantages and disadvantages were never analyzed in full prior to the upheaval that toppled the Qing dynasty.

The shallowness of their republicanism notwithstanding, it is significant in the context of our discussion that both Zou Rong and Sun Yat-sen perceived abolition of monarchy as part of the overall "progress" of China. Recall that in the beginning of the twentieth century only two major Western powers (the US and France) were republics, while the norm was constitutional monarchy. Yet radical Chinese intellectuals were attracted to what appeared to be the most "scientific" and "rational" mode of rule, hoping therewith to allow China to leapfrog Western powers on the way to full modernization. This radicalism was indicative of the future trend of China's development: once the belief in "progress" supplanted the erstwhile respect for tradition and stability, ever more radical political models could be adopted.

By 1904–1905, the Qing government realized the degree of despair among radical elite members as well as among broader publics, and tried to regain the initiative by launching reforms that included, on the administrative level, experiments in elections of provincial assemblies and the plan to eventually adopt constitutional monarchy. Yet this belated and half-hearted acceptance of the idea of popular representation proved to be a dangerous gamble, as it further eroded the theretofore-unquestionable ideological hegemony of the monarchic system. Ideas that attracted in 1900 only a handful of young radicals became by 1910 accepted by broad segments of the educated elite. As the reforms faltered, the disgruntled elite members became increasingly receptive to the republican propaganda of the revolutionaries. The court, run by a group of particularly inept regents on behalf of a child emperor, Puyi (r. 1908–1912), was unable to regain the political initiative. What started as a small mutiny of a group of conspirators in

Wuhan in October 1911, suddenly brought about the rapid disintegration of the Qing Empire. Having lost its legitimacy, the dynasty – and with it the entire imperial system – fell with unbelievable ease. In February 1912, Empress Dowager Longyu (1868–1913) signed an edict of abdication in favor of the Chinese Republic. A new era in Chinese history had begun.¹²

IN SEARCH OF A REPUBLICAN EMPEROR

As the above discussion suggests, in marked distinction from the Chinese Empire, the Republic of China came into existence abruptly and almost incidentally, after a very short period of a superficial exposure by parts of the educated elite to Western political theories. Predictably, a hasty replacement of the old imperial system with the new republican one created a legitimacy vacuum, which brought about a severe crisis. From the beginning it turned out that there was no single ready republican model to be employed; it was neither clear how to divide responsibilities among different executives, such as the president, vice president, and prime minister, nor how to maintain the relations between the president and the parliament, between the center and the provinces, and so on. To aggravate these problems, many political actors were backed by military forces personally loyal to their leaders; as such it became common from the first months of the Republic to rely on force to settle political disputes. And, above all, suddenly the country lacked the single arbiter: there was no longer any person possessing the undisputed symbolic prestige of the emperor. Coexistence of several equally legitimate loci of power meant inevitable turmoil; the millennia-old statement “oneness [of the ruler] brings orderly rule; doubleness brings chaos” again proved to be true.

The gravest consequence of the absence of an emperor was the ensuing military crisis. In the Qing, as in most preceding dynasties, military command was decentralized; there were no general headquarters with exclusive power over disparate military forces, and those owed their ultimate allegiance to the emperor alone. In the last years of the Qing dynasty, a thorough military reform started: it included professionalization of the military, especially of the officers; enhancing the prestige of a military career

12 For the late Qing reforms, see Chuzo 1980; Dai Angang 2014; Li Zhenwu 2014; for the Republican Revolution, see Gasster 1980. See also Spence 1999:243–263 for an abridged account of these events.

and attracting local elite members to the army; training the officers abroad; and many other reforms. Creation of a uniform chain of command was duly planned, but did not materialize before the Republican Revolution, so that the Republic inherited from its inception multiple autonomous military units.¹³ The strongest of these was the Beiyang army, whose erstwhile leader, Yuan Shikai (1859–1916), played the crucial role in first defending the Qing court against the revolutionaries, and then fostering peaceful abdication of the Qing, for which he was rewarded by the revolutionaries with the uncontested position of the first president of the young republic. Yet Yuan's Beiyang army was only one of many military groups in the country. In the provinces it had to compete with "new armies" that were established at the beginning of the twentieth century and the integration of which into a national army was not realized. Since some of these "new armies" became the backbone of revolutionary forces during the Republican Revolution of 1911–1912, their commanders had to be rewarded for their contribution to the revolutionary cause. And, as some of these commanders had close ties with the province's civilian leaders, there was an increasing fear that they would turn to serving local rather than national interests. It was mandatory for the central government led by Yuan Shikai to rein in military forces.

Alas, this task proved unattainable under the circumstances of the early Republic. While military leaders acquiesced with Yuan Shikai's suppression of Sun Yat-sen's revolutionaries only a year after the Republic was established, and although they supported his centralization measures, they were reluctant to fulfill his other demand – namely, to demobilize much of their bloated staff. Generals realized perfectly well that without soldiers they would become vulnerable to the perfidious president; hence they refused to comply with demobilization orders. Frustrated, Yuan Shikai opted for what might have seemed to him the easiest solution. In late 1915 he declared himself emperor, hoping to regain the missing prestige and be able thereby to subjugate military leaders once and for all to the throne. This was a bad gamble, though. The ensuing military mutiny did not just oust Yuan, but also greatly complicated the political situation in the center. In the absence of Yuan Shikai, a new series of power struggles broke out involving the vice president, the prime minister, the parliament, and yet another rival parliament established by Sun Yat-sen in the far south. Once again, a restoration of the imperial power was attempted in mid-1917; but

13 For the origins of warlordism in China and its connection to the Qing military reforms, see McCord 1993.

it also failed miserably. The real power shifted from the entirely discredited political establishment to the warlords in the provinces, ushering in the warlord era.¹⁴

From 1916–1917 on, rival warlords divided the country among themselves; and while displaying nominal fidelity to the concept of unified rule and to republican legitimacy, they were practically engaged in defending their autonomy (Sheridan 1983). The reason for this situation was self-evident: unlike the emperor, the “republic,” “nation,” and “constitution” were abstract symbols that could not issue commands and demand subordination, so that any general could claim to act on behalf of republican ideals while *de facto* defending his regional rule against the center and against rival military potentates. Soon enough it became clear to most political actors that the only solution to the ongoing turmoil was renewed integration and centralization of political power. And the millennia-old tradition implied that centralization requires a centralizer: the single individual who would personify political legitimacy and become a new locus of loyalty throughout the huge, heterogeneous, and militarily divided realm. Yuan Shikai was the first to try this obvious solution but failed: the idea of full imperial restoration appeared to be discredited. This did not mean, however, that the idea of a leader’s singularity was also discredited. Rather, new generations of republican leaders had to devise a new means of attaining quasi-imperial powers under the republican mantle. This triggered a long age of what may be dubbed China’s post-imperial detoxification from its addiction to imperial rule. Every major leader, from the first decade of the Republic on, tried to establish his authority in a way compatible to that of the emperors; the difference was mostly in the degree of the leaders’ success rather than in the general direction of their action.

The renewed trend to strengthen an individual ruler’s authority was clear from the transformation of Sun Yat-sen from a republican revolutionary into a potential dictator. Sun was not an excessively ambitious man. He duly displayed his modesty in the aftermath of the Republican Revolution when he yielded his ephemeral position as the revolutionaries’ president to Yuan Shikai, accepting the position of transportation minister in Yuan’s cabinet (Bergère 1998:227–236). Yet Sun’s opposition to Yuan’s dictatorship brought a clash between the two, which ended in Sun’s resounding defeat in 1913. Bitterly disappointed, Sun learned that to become the new

14 For Yuan Shikai’s rule, see Young 1983. For the post-Yuan developments, see Nathan 1983.

Republic's leader he should bolster his personal authority. In a newly established Revolutionary Party (1914) Sun demanded that the members swear "absolute loyalty" to him; later, as the leader of revolutionary regimes in China's far south, he moved further toward forming a personality cult of his own. At the first congress of Sun's reorganized Party of the Nation (mistakenly dubbed the Nationalist Party in Western literature: *Guomindang* 國民黨, GMD or *Kuomintang*, KMT), the delegates "first saluted the Guomindang flag three times, then bowed to Sun Yat-sen" (Bergère 1998:325), emphasizing thereby Sun's absolute superiority over the party members. Sun's death in March 1925, just at the early stage of consolidation of his regime, cut short his potential movement toward dictatorship; but his cult of personality was posthumously carried on by his GMD followers, peaking in 1940 in proclaiming Sun "Father of the Nation." Perhaps nothing buttresses Sun's quasi-imperial status more than his monumental mausoleum located in the close vicinity of – and purportedly *above* – the tomb of the founder of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Zhu Yuanzhang (a.k.a. Ming Taizu, r. 1368–1398), from whom Sun drew inspiration.¹⁵ Sun Yat-sen's transformation into an emperor was never complete, both due to his personal distaste of the position and due to the limited nature of his *de facto* authority; but his movement in an "imperial" direction is undeniable.

In developing their cults of personality, neither Sun Yat-sen, nor his successor at the head of the GMD, Jiang Jieshi (a.k.a. Chiang Kai-shek, 1887–1975, see below), acted as restorers of the empire; after all, the first half of the twentieth century provided them with many examples of relatively successful non-imperial dictators – from Stalin to Mussolini – whose achievements Chinese leaders were ready to emulate. Yet analyzing their actions through the prism of the imperial past is significant not only to understand the underlying rationale but also to highlight their major failure. In retrospect it is clear that one of the major sources of the Republic's weaknesses was the inability of its leaders to attain the exclusivity of the emperors' position, and their resultant inefficacy in performing the same stabilizing tasks as the emperors of the past did. This failure had far-reaching implications for the inadequate functioning of their regimes, and for the eventual collapse of the Chinese Republic in 1949. To illustrate this point I shall briefly turn to the example of Jiang Jieshi whose relatively long tenure in power (1928–1949 on the mainland, and from

15 For Sun's posthumous cult, see Bergère 1998:410–412; for Sun's tomb compared to the tomb of Zhu Yuanzhang, see Nedostup 2008.

1949 until his death in 1975 in Taiwan) allows meaningful analysis of his successes and failures.

JIANG JIESHI: A FAILED EMPEROR?

From the beginning it should be emphasized that I by no means want to disparage Jiang, who faced the formidable tasks of restoring domestic unity, withstanding Japanese aggression, crushing Communist insurrection, and navigating his badly battered country toward stability and prosperity. Given the miserable state of the Chinese economy and society at the time of his ascendancy, and given how mighty his foreign and domestic enemies were, his ultimate failure comes as no surprise. This said, the weaknesses of Jiang's regime were primarily determined by internal factors. Among many reasons for Jiang's failure, the single most important one in my eyes is his inability to consolidate his position and turn himself into a single locus of authority even among his nominal followers and supporters.

Throughout much of his reign, Jiang acted more as a head of the warlord coalition, a *primus inter pares*, rather than an omnipotent leader in an imperial style. He had several independent bases of power, most notably among the former cadets of the Huangpu military academy, which he headed since its inception in 1924, as well as within business circles and in the criminal underworld of Shanghai. Gradually he succeeded in subjugating the GMD party apparatus to his will as well; yet, all these were not enough to firmly establish his authority over manifold warlords who joined the coalition led by GMD since 1925–1926, but who remained adamantly unwilling to yield their autonomous military power to the central government. Contradictions between Jiang and his nominal underlings caused a series of bloody conflicts, including four inter-warlord wars in 1929–1931. These conflicts allowed the battered Communist Party of China (CPC) to regain political initiative and create independent power bases in China's hinterland, while its enemies were preoccupied with killing each other. Although Jiang emerged victorious from these conflicts, his victories were never decisive. The rival warlords retained much of their authority and while nominally subordinate to Jiang they were sufficiently independent of his will to repeatedly challenge him. The most famous case of such insubordination is the so-called Xi'an Incident (1936), when local warlords Zhang Xue-liang and Yang Hucheng kidnapped Jiang and threatened to execute him in order to convince him to give up the struggle against the Communists

and endorse the national front against the Japanese aggressors. This action had completely undermined Jiang's decade-long attempt to eradicate the CPC and may have ultimately caused his defeat at the hands of the CPC a decade later.¹⁶

Direct challenges to his rule aside, Jiang's inability to either subjugate or eliminate his opponents from among the nominal subordinates was the major cause of his perennial weakness vis-à-vis domestic and foreign foes. Time and again, his military, economic, and administrative policies had to be modified so as to serve the immediate needs of preserving Jiang's authority within his own camp, at the expense of long-term interests of his cause (see van de Ven 2003). Militarily, Jiang never commanded full allegiance of China's manifold military forces, and was unable to devise an effective military strategy; politically he had to acquiesce to a variety of powerful individuals who never accepted his rule as fully legitimate. Behind the thin veneer of nominal recognition of his supreme leadership, the country remained disunited and Jiang had to continuously maneuver among manifold allies and foes without ever being able to dictate his will. He bolstered his cult of personality, concentrated executive powers in his hands, and elevated himself to the position of the nation's paramount leader, but none of these steps were fully successful. Somewhat ironically, it was only after his major defeat in China's lengthy civil war and the relocation to Taiwan that Jiang succeeded in firmly solidifying his authority. By then, however, he was no longer a candidate for emperorship of China; he ended his life as China's last regional lord.

In the final account, it seems that the failure of the Republic of China – under Jiang and under his predecessors – was similar in its nature to the failure of the late Qing dynasty. On the eve of the Republican Revolution, the imperial institution was at the nadir of its power, and its hasty abolition had further exacerbated the crisis of authority. Notwithstanding the observers' frequent indignation against the authoritarian tendencies of the Republic's leaders from Yuan Shikai to Jiang Jieshi, it seems that their regime's major malady was not an excessive despotism but rather the absence of effective leadership. Being unable to fully mobilize the nation and its resources, the Republican leaders failed to facilitate China's revival. This

16 Jiang Jieshi's career is discussed in several studies, some of which demonize him while others try to eulogize. See, e.g., Fenby 2003; Taylor 2009. My discussion is indebted primarily, albeit not exclusively, to Eastman (1986a, 1986b). For the Xi'an incident, see Shai 2012.

lesson was fully internalized by their successors, the Communist leaders under Mao Zedong (1893–1976), who proclaimed, on 1 October 1949, the establishment of the new People's Republic of China. A new era in Chinese history had begun.

“THE SAGE EMPEROR”: MAO AND HIS AFTERMATH

Mao Zedong is the most natural candidate to the position of China's ultimate “post-imperial emperor.” Only a very few individuals in China's long history could rival Mao in terms of the magnitude of his power and in terms of his all-encompassing impact on the lives of his subjects. Many scholars noted commonalities between Mao's personal style and the nature of his authority and that of earlier emperors, particularly the dynastic founders (e.g., Andrew and Rapp 2000). Mao himself was clearly aware of the parallels (see below). It would be incongruous, though, to reduce the phenomenon of Mao's power to a sort of “imperial atavism”: his cult of personality had unmistakable modern components, being fuelled by the Soviet and GMD precedents no less than by China's imperial past. Nor should we consider dictatorial tendencies as perennial to Mao's rule. Actually, in the first decades of his leadership (which started in the CPC around 1935),¹⁷ Mao was more often than not a *primus inter pares* who adopted the collegial form of leadership according to the Leninist principles of democratic centralism. In the 1940s Mao was elevated much above his comrades and his cult of personality ensued. This development mirrored the parallel cults of Jiang Jieshi and of Stalin, but this was not a lasting tendency. While in 1945, at the Party's 7th Congress, Mao's thought had been enshrined in the Party's Constitution as one of its major ideological guidelines, this clause was omitted from the renewed Constitution accepted at the 8th Congress in 1956. In 1956 Mao also started pondering a retreat from the position of the state's Chairman to the “second line” of leadership, so as to avoid the pressure of everyday tasks.¹⁸

17 Conventional wisdom considers Mao's leadership in CPC as starting in January 1935 following the so-called Zunyi conference of Party leaders. It is possible, however, as perceptively noticed by Kampen (1999), that the real story was more equivocal, and Mao's rise more gradual, than the later Party propaganda presented.

18 For the first decade of Mao's rule in the People's Republic of China and for the 8th Congress of the CPC, see Teiwes 1993.

It was only by the late 1950s that Mao's rule moved decidedly in the imperial direction. This shift started with his most astounding failure: launching the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960). This ill-conceived mass campaign, aimed at tremendous acceleration of agricultural and industrial production by encouraging enthusiasm among laborers, while ignoring any economic or scientific data that did not fit Mao's eschatological vision of leapfrogging into Communism, failed miserably. An economic crisis of unprecedented dimensions and ensuing mass starvation caused a severe setback to Mao's image and brought about the first significant split in the CPC leadership in two decades. At the leadership meeting in Lushan (July 1959), the minister of defense, Marshal Peng Dehuai, bitterly criticized Mao's mistaken policies. The criticism itself was conducted according to the norms of intra-party democracy, but the results could not have been predicted. Mao interpreted it as a personal attack and demanded the resignations of Peng and his associates. The leadership agreed, thereby confirming that henceforth Mao would be considered irreplaceable and infallible, an emperor and not a Chairman (see Lieberthal 1993; MacFarquhar 1983). Any criticism against him would be regarded as the new equivalent of the "Great Irreverence" crime of the past, leading to disastrous consequences for a dissenter.¹⁹

By the early 1960s Mao's symbolic power was uncontested; but his actual ability to influence political life had, paradoxically, declined. Mao complained in 1966 that he was treated as a "dead ancestor" (Schram 1975:267) – i.e., revered but not really obeyed. Having voluntarily retreated from everyday political involvement, Mao soon found himself in a similar trap from which most of the emperors could not escape: enjoying superhuman authority in principle, he had only limited influence on practical affairs. Yet Mao, like the paragon emperors whom he adored – the First Emperor of Qin and Zhu Yuanzhang – was determined to rule, as appropriate for the sage monarch, and not just to reign. The resultant schism between him and his comrades became one of the major factors behind Mao's final and most controversial campaign, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).²⁰

19 The crime of "Great Irreverence" included various deeds that could harm the emperor personally. It was considered part of the "Ten Abominations": the gravest and unpardonable crimes under imperial law.

20 For Mao's decreasing political involvement in the early 1960s and for the origins of the Cultural Revolution, see Harding 1993; Lieberthal 1993; and MacFarquhar 1997.

Looking at the immensely complex phenomenon of the Cultural Revolution from the angle of the imperial political culture and Mao's struggle to reassert his position as a sage monarch and not just a figurehead emperor may shed new light on yet another factor that prompted Mao to start an unprecedented assault on the very establishment that he headed – namely, his fear of “revisionism.” Scholars usually analyze Mao's obsession with “revisionism” in the Party and his fears that the Party would lose its way after his death in the context of his lessons from the de-Stalinization and subsequent “revisionist trend” in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) under Nikita S. Khrushchev (1894–1971).²¹ Yet Mao's fears of “revisionism” also had a more immediate Chinese background. An avid reader of dynastic histories, he knew well how astute bureaucrats succeeded time and again to dismantle or hollow the unfavorable policies imposed on them by resolute emperors. An example of Zhu Yuanzhang – a rebel-turned-emperor whose pro-peasant policy, which he imposed on reluctant officials, was moderated and abandoned soon after his death – was arguably of no less significance for Mao than the CPSU events.²² In turning the tables on his bureaucrats Mao might have hoped to prevent the recurrence of this course of events after his own demise. With the advantage of hindsight we may conclude that Mao's fears were justified, and his policies were indeed revised or abandoned by his successors. Ironically, the Cultural Revolution itself might have contributed more than anything else toward discrediting the Maoist vision, thereby contributing to the “revisionist” revival after his death.

The Cultural Revolution, once launched, turned Mao from a “dead ancestor” into a full-fledged ruler, the Sage Monarch who rules and not just

21 For these analyses, see Lieberthal 1993:139–145 and MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006:3–9.

22 For Zhu Yuanzhang's career and the country's eventual deviation from his policies soon after his death, see Dardess 1983; Dreyer 1982; and Farmer 1995. Zhu Yuanzhang, fully aware of the dangers of his bureaucrats hijacking his regime, did his best to prevent this outcome, including launching a reign of terror against his officials. Mao's favorite historian – and one of the first victims of the Cultural Revolution – Wu Han (1909–1969) wrote Zhu Yuanzhang's biography, which he revised upon Mao's personal request. The revised version, albeit acknowledging the “class character” of Zhu Yuanzhang's purges against his bureaucrats, did not absolve the emperor from whimsical despotism, paranoia, and sadism. This thinly veiled attack on the former rebel becoming a tyrant was all too well understood by Mao, and it might have contributed more than anything else to Wu Han's persecution. See more about Wu Han in Mazur 2009.

reigns, the one whose ideas, and not just body, are sacrosanct.²³ Mao fully utilized his superhuman status to overawe the Party establishment; his will was the absolute and only guiding force and his whims determined more than any other factor the twists and turns of his final campaign. Suppression of the party, state, and military leaders and subsequent rehabilitation of some of them; formation and disbandment of the Red Guards; involving the army in politics and then ordering it to return to the barracks happened exclusively because Mao willed them to happen. His position as the Sage Monarch was duly buttressed by the official propaganda, which declared him “genius,” his every sentence “is a Truth, one single sentence of his surpasses ten thousand of ours” (Dittmer 1989:118). Mao’s divinization – unprecedented even for China’s most powerful monarchs – achieved somewhat grotesque proportions, with myriads of statues, badges, and other symbols of loyalty and of adoration flooding the country. “Loyalty campaigns” launched by some of the more fervent Maoists buttressed his commonalities with the emperors; and his “Selected Quotations” were to be memorized much like the “Sacred Edicts” of the emperors of the past.²⁴ His position as a Savior – another characteristic of the True Monarch (Pines 2014) – was emphasized in the unofficial hymn of those days, “The East is Red,” which plainly stated: “Chairman Mao is the Great Savior Star of the people.”

Mao’s latter years brought China very close to imperial restoration; not coincidentally, it was then that Mao openly identified himself with the First Emperor, who was thenceforth forbidden to be criticized in scholarly publications (Liu Zehua 2012). Yet these years also brought about an unkind reminder of the perils of the system of individual rule. All the negative aspects of Chinese monarchic culture transpired then: political instability due to the leader’s whims; succession struggles that could turn bloody;²⁵ vicious machinations of the “inner court” led by Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing

23 Mao’s equation with the “Sage Monarch” is outlined in Liu Zehua 2015.

24 For some of the religious dimensions of the Cultural Revolution, see texts collected by Schoenhals 1996. The “Sacred Edicts” (or literally, “the Sage’s Edicts” *sheng yu* 聖諭) were issued by several of the most powerful emperors (notably Zhu Yuanzhang) as succinct admonitions and instructions to the subjects. These edicts – and, infrequently, texts of other emperors – were supposed to be memorized by heart. Zhu Yuanzhang even organized competitions of recitation of his “Great Proclamations” (Schneewind 2001:341).

25 This refers to the purge of Marshal Lin Biao, Mao’s designated heir-apparent, who died in a plane crash while trying to flee China. See accounts of Lin Biao’s fall in MacFarquhar 1993:254–278 and compare Qiu Jin 1991.

(1914–1991), and her henchmen; and the pathetic picture of an ailing man, whose words were the final verdict on any matter of importance, notwithstanding the physical impairment that prevented him from communicating normally even with the closest members of his entourage (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006). This situation highlighted anew the weaknesses of monarchic rule. Mao’s “emperorship” stabilized the country in the 1950s; but by the 1970s it became the chief destabilizing factor. It became increasingly clear that complete concentration of power in the hands of a single person – whatever his merits are – cannot but eventually become counterproductive, even in terms of simple efficiency. The lesson was duly learned. Soon after Mao’s death, his successors (many of whom were his victims during the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution) began moving China unequivocally in the direction of a full “imperial detoxification.”

This “detoxification” accelerated in both parts of China under the next generation of leaders, who were born in the very late years of the empire: Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) on the Mainland and Jiang Jingguo (Chiang Ching-kuo 1910–1988) in Taiwan. Both had dramatically reduced personality cults and presided over smooth transitions to essentially non-monarchical governments. Taiwan adopted a Western-style parliamentary democracy; yet the advantages and drawbacks of this decision cannot be adequately summarized at this stage and will not be dealt with here. The Mainland, alternatively, evolved into a kind of Leninist oligarchy with power shared by a group of top party leaders, members of the Politburo Standing Committee. These leaders act as a “collective emperor.” While not one of them individually possesses the imperial aura and exclusiveness, as a group they enjoy nearly absolute power and symbolize the state’s unity, stability, and prosperity. The transformation from autocratic to collegial rule began with Deng Xiaoping, but it was under his non-charismatic successor, Jiang Zemin (b. 1926), that China truly entered a new age. Jiang instituted the system of mandatory retirement and imposed term limits for top executives; in 2002 he set an example by voluntarily – even if grudgingly – stepping down and allowing the next generation of leaders to assume power.²⁶ This smooth power transfer was repeated at the 18th Party’s Congress in 2012, when General Secretary Hu Jintao (b. 1942) and his colleagues stepped down, yielding power to the next generation of party leaders led by Xi Jinping (b. 1953).

26 For Jiang’s transmission of power, see Nathan and Gilley 2003.

Currently (2015), China's experiment with oligarchic leadership appears impressively successful, and it may even be interpreted as a neat solution to the perennial weaknesses of monarchic rule. The principle of collective leadership, term limits, and the introduction of a mandatory retirement age may prevent the rise of inept leaders; these safeguards may also preclude top executives from remaining in office after becoming physically or mentally debilitated, as occurred with the first generation of CPC leaders. Current chief executives undergo lengthy processes of recruitment, training, and socialization into the top leadership, which renders them incomparably fitter for their tasks than were the majority of the emperors. Assuming that this system of leadership selection, training, and rotation is maintained appropriately (which is not always the case, as recent corruption scandals involving top officials indicate),²⁷ then the CPC can be credited with mending one of the weakest aspects of China's imperial system – the emperor's potential inadequacy – without jeopardizing the principle of a single source of legitimate authority. This said, a word of caution is required. The current system can be effectively maintained only insofar as the collective leadership adheres to the Leninist principles of resolving internal contradictions confidentially and presenting a unified front to the outside world. Any deviation from this facade of unity may have the disastrous consequence of exacerbating political conflicts in the party and in society at large, as happened on the eve of the tragic events of the 1989 Tiananmen incident.²⁸

AFTERTHOUGHTS: EMPIRE AND MODERNITY

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, having experienced more than three decades of rapid economic growth, China achieved prosperity for a much higher percentage of its citizens than could have been imagined only

27 Since his election in 2012/2013, President Xi Jinping launched a massive anti-corruption crackdown, which led to the downfall of several high-level political and military leaders, including Zhou Yongkang (b. 1942), a member of the all-powerful Politburo Standing Committee (2007–2012). From this and parallel cases it is clear that despite overall improvement of the selection procedures within the party, much room remains for nepotism, bribery, and promotion of one's personal cronies.

28 For an analysis of the events that led to the Tiananmen tragedy, see Baum 1997. For a critical assessment of the potential for divisiveness among the current CPC leaders and the means they employ to prevent this divisiveness from jeopardizing the collective leadership, see Li Cheng 2016. For a highly laudatory account of China's current system of "collective presidency," see Hu Angang 2014.

a generation ago. At least in terms of economic performance, China appears well on the way toward resurrecting its past glory and realizing what the new President, Xi Jinping, dubs “China’s Dream.” And yet, the search for the country’s future path of sociopolitical and cultural development continues, and, at least among segments of its intellectual community, intensifies. For some, it means the ongoing search for a “Modern China,” i.e., advancement toward fully embracing “modern” (namely, Western, which are currently identified as liberal rather than Marxist) values and operational modes. For others – an increasingly vociferous minority – the priority of “modern” over “traditional” is no longer self-evident. Rather than emulate the West, these intellectuals suggest that the country draw its inspiration for its future path from its past.

Interest in the legacy of the past is increasing in China almost daily, paralleling the rise in national pride and the resultant more affirmative view of the imperial enterprise. This interest has copious manifestations. On the popular level it is promoted through a variety of popular publications, movies, TV serials, and even Internet games that deal with emperors, meritorious ministers, generals, and other heroes from the past. On the level of official discourse it is reflected in the adoption of new terminology, such as Hu Jintao’s employment of the term “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui*) as a substitute for the class-based ideology of the past, or in Xi Jinping’s habit to invoke texts of the “Hundred Schools” in his speeches (Buckley 2014). On a more substantial level we see the work of certain members of the academic community who are eager to promote a “Confucian revival.”²⁹ This is not a unidirectional movement, though. In an increasingly vibrant public sphere, those who want to restore the glory of the past – including even the possible restoration of a “symbolic monarchy” – confront their opponents who reaffirm the negative view of China’s political tradition as an impediment to the country’s progress.³⁰ It is not my intention here to join these debates, but these may set a convenient stage for my concluding remarks.

Traditional China possessed one of the world’s most sophisticated political traditions. Its monarchic system was developed through cumulative efforts of generations of intellectuals who sought to attain lasting

29 For some aspects of this “revival,” see, e.g., Bell 2008; Billioud 2010. For a few representative texts in English, see Yan Xuetong 2011; Bai Tongdong 2012; Jiang Qing 2013.

30 Compare, e.g., Jiang Qing 2013 with Liu Zehua 2014b, 2015.

political stability. The failure of this system to withstand the assault of modernity necessitated its replacement. This replacement, however, was performed haphazardly and without due intellectual preparations; as a result many positive aspects of the traditional political system were unduly sacrificed. As the above discussion demonstrated, this sudden rupture in China's political life caused painful repercussions, impeding the country's development, and causing China to fluctuate for decades between anarchy and disintegration on the one hand and ruthless dictatorship on the other. A cavalier attitude toward traditional values, "cultural nihilism" of some of China's leading modern intellectuals (Lin Yü-sheng 1979), and their failure to grasp the country's political tradition in its immense complexity caused the country a severe loss of self-awareness. While I do not deny the merits of "destroying the old so that the new can be built" (to borrow a Cultural Revolution slogan), it is equally true that smashing the past in its entirety leaves the country rootless and makes it more vulnerable to changing intellectual fashions that are shaped outside its boundaries and that may not fit its peculiar necessities.

It is patently clear that – notwithstanding the voices of self-proclaimed cultural traditionalists – the reversal of history and resurrection of the past are impossible. What is needed is not an imperial restoration of sorts but a renewed sober assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of traditional models, and perhaps selective adaptation of some of the former ideas to the new functioning patterns of Chinese society and the state. Whatever the result will be, one thing can be affirmed: China's complex history is – and will remain for a foreseeable future – highly relevant to its present. Now, as always, studying China's past is essential for an understanding of China's future.

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