1911: The Unanchored Chinese Revolution*

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Abstract

One hundred years after the 1911 Revolution (Xinhai Revolution) in China, its meaning continues to be highly contested. Paradoxically, the more time that passes, the less certain either political actors or scholars seem to be about the significance of 1911 for the path of Chinese revolutionary history. This essay examines three phenomena: the appropriation of 1911 in contemporary political and popular culture; the use of 1911 as a metaphor for contemporary politics by PRC historians; and the changing meaning of 1911 over the past ten decades, particularly during the years of the war against Japan. The essay concludes that it is precisely the "unanchored" nature of 1911, separated from any one path of historical interpretation, that has kept its meaning simultaneously uncertain and potent.

Keywords: 1911 revolution; Xinhai revolution; Yang Tianshi; Yuan Weishi; Zhang Kaiyuan; Chiang Kaishek; Mao Zedong; Wang Jingwei

Doubt has recently been cast on the comment attributed to Zhou Enlai that it was too early to judge the outcome of the French Revolution: it now seems that when he said it was too early to tell, he may have meant 1968 and not 1789.[1] Yet, even if Zhou's reluctance to weigh in on the storming of the Bastille no longer has such an air of mystery about it, there is another more recent revolutionary event on which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has not yet been able to stamp a definitive set of meanings: the Xinhai revolution (*Xinhai geming* 辛亥革命) of 1911. Nor is the Party the only entity that still harbours doubts about the events of that autumn now a century distant: significant thinkers and activists have also remained hesitant in their final judgement on it or have even dismissed it altogether. In 1995, Liu Zaifu 劉再復 and Li Zehou 李泽厚, both distinguished Marxist critics, published their controversial book *Farewell to Revolution*,[2] which argued in disillusioned fashion against the legacy

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1 Richard McGregor, "Zhou's cryptic caution lost in translation," *Financial Times*, 10 June 2011; http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/74916db6-938d-11e0-922e-00144feab49a.html#axzz1YOO7I4qj.

2 Liu Zaifu and Li Zehou, *Gaobie geming: huiwang ershi shiji Zhongguo (Farewell to Revolution: Looking Back at 20th-Century China)* (Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu youxian gongsi chubanshe, 1995).

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of China's 20th-century revolutions, provoking equal ire from social activists and official critics in Beijing. In contrast, one of the most influential public intellectuals in China today, Wang Hui 汪晖, has written repeatedly that China's revolutionary history should be neither forgotten nor misunderstood, and restates the validity of China's revolutionary path, without excusing its many failures.[3] These positions provide two useful intellectual poles between which to debate the future (and past) of the Chinese revolution. For on its 100th anniversary, the role of one of the iconic events on that path, the 1911 revolution, in these debates still remains vague and unformed.

Anniversaries have regularly caused trouble for the Chinese authorities, whether 1949 or 1989, but the anniversaries marked in 2011 have been less immediately politically problematic. The 90th anniversary of the founding of the CCP on 1 July 2011 gave rise to a predictable range of party encomia. The centenary of the Xinhai revolution of October 1911, however, presents a different sort of problem, not so much of a difficult or controversial event that needs to be smoothed over, but rather of a historical vessel which is still, a hundred years later, waiting to be filled. On 10 October 1911, the sudden discovery of a bomb plot in Wuhan by the Qing dynasty's authorities led to a rebellion by the city's military garrison, which spread within days to other cities and provinces in China. The events that followed led to the abdication of the emperor and the establishment of the Republic of China on 1 January 1912, presided over for a few brief weeks by Sun Yat-sen, the revolutionary who had in fact been abroad at the time the revolution broke out. But the significance of that revolution, beyond the change in form of government, was unclear at the time and has remained troubled and contested in the hundred years since.

This essay examines the mutability of 1911 in two major areas. First, it highlights the uneasy relationship between the contemporary People's Republic of China (PRC) and the revolution that gave birth to its predecessor republic. 1911 still serves as a metaphor for contemporary political reform, and one that gives the contemporary CCP a great deal of cause for sober reflection. (There is, of course, a parallel politics of 1911 in Taiwan, but broadly speaking, it is much less central to the dynamics of the contemporary polity; even the Nationalist party, with its relatively warm relations with the mainland, is at pains to suggest a different and more low-key approach to 1911 as a political entity.) The second part of the essay points out that there is nothing new in the appropriation of 1911 for contemporary political purposes, but that those purposes have changed greatly over the past ten decades. Overall, it will suggest that the Xinhai revolution has lacked for meaning neither in its immediate aftermath nor in the present day: rather, it has become a historical event which is capable of almost infinite malleability depending on the agenda of the interpreter,

3 This is implied also in the title given by his English-language publishers to the translation of his selected essays: Wang Hui, *The End of the Revolution: China and the Limits of Modernity* (London: Verso, 2009).

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something that could not be claimed of other dates central to modern Chinese historiography such as 1949 or 1966.

It is not the intention of this article to provide a comprehensive survey of scholarly work on the 1911 revolution. It is worth noting, however, that there has so far been relatively little revisionist work published specifically to coincide with its centenary.[4] In the West, classic work such as Mary C. Wright's and Joseph Esherick's monographs[5] still stand as major contributions, but a great deal of more recent English-language work on the period has focused on other aspects of the late Qing era, including the 1898 reforms and the Xinzheng (新郑, New Government) reforms of 1902–11 rather than the revolution itself. The relative absence of work specifically on the revolution, as opposed to the eras surrounding it, are perhaps also an indication of an unease as to how exactly to interpret the event.

A Popular 1911?

The lack of fixed meaning for 1911 does not mean that there is a lack of willing interpreters. An official discourse seeks to use the anniversary to support the PRC government's interpretation of the anniversary's significance. Numerous activities have taken place to portray 1911 as an important element in contemporary cross-Strait reconciliation. News reporters from 26 media outlets from both sides of the Strait were brought together in July 2011 for a programme to "Retake the Xinhai Road," which included visits to revolutionary sites in Guangzhou, Zhongshan, Wuhan, Nanjing and Beijing, during which they discussed the achievements of Sun Yat-sen and the other revolutionaries. The agenda was made unequivocally clear by Ye Kedong 叶克冬, deputy director of the State Council on Taiwan Affairs, who declared that "We cannot forget that the most important political heritage of the 1911 revolution is the revival of the Chinese nation [which is] the shared wish of all Chinese people and a sacred mission given to us by history." Ye goes on to declare that the joint reporters' mission should provoke "deep thinking about the significance of the peaceful development of cross-straits relations."[6]

Across China, other official celebrations of 1911 have been launched. Tianjin Television held a press conference at the Great Hall of the People to mark the production of a television drama hailed by the Propaganda Department of the

4 A survey of key work published in China on the 1911 revolution in the decade 2000–09 is Zhang Kaiyuan and Tian Tong, "Xin shiji zhi chu de Xinhai geming shi yanjiu" ("Research on the Xinhai revolution at the start of the new century"), *Zhejiang shehui kexue*, No. 9 (2010), pp. 89–98. The aftermath of the centenary may provide more material for scholarly reflection. A major conference on the 1911 revolution is scheduled for October 2011 at the Institute of Modern History of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, which is likely to produce a set of scholarly essays.

5 Mary C. Wright, *China in Revolution: The First Phase, 1900–1913* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), and Joseph Esherick, *Reform and Revolution in China: The 1911 Revolution in Hunan and Hubei* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

6 http://news.xinhuanet.com/local/2011-07/18/c_121684917.htm.

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Central Committee of the CCP as a major landmark in the official celebrations of the centenary of the revolution.[7] Wuhan, as the city where the accidental revolution was sparked, has also benefited, with the building of a 1911 revolutionary monument and museum, at a cost of 414 million yuan, the centrepiece of which is a structure with a startling similarity to the Washington Monument. Less extravagant, but also more marginal in connection, is the port city of Tangshan's new statue of Sun Yat-sen with his hand outstretched. Sun had proposed the building of a major port on the Bohai Sea, and Tangshan portrays itself as the embodiment of that proposal.[8]

The centenary of the 1911 revolution has also opened up a wealth of commercial possibilities. On the website *Xinhai geming jinian* (辛亥革命纪念, "Remember the Xinhai revolution"), an official store sells T-shirts and baseball caps all emblazoned with the slogan *Tianxia wei gong* 天下为公 (the phrase endorsed by Sun to mean "what is under heaven is for the benefit of all"). More enterprisingly, perhaps, the Zhongshan City Tea Fair drew on Sun's declaration in that tea was a "national drink" for China, and used his image on special packages of Puer Tea.[9]

Away from the brash certainties of the Party and the market, however, the meaning of 1911 remains as nebulous as it always has been. One of the central questions about 1911, after all, is what, if anything, it changed in Chinese society, a doubt expressed with black irony by Lu Xun in his collection of stories *Call to Arms* (*Nahan* 吶喊), published just a few years after the revolution. This question inspired a debate in December 2010 between university students from both sides of the Taiwan Strait on the question "Were social conditions ready for the 1911 revolution?" Taiwan's Chengchi University supported the motion, and Nanjing University opposed it. Declaring that, in comparison to Britain and France, economic and social conditions were unripe for revolution, Nanjing's team actually won the debate, albeit narrowly.[10] However, another debate on the true meaning of Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People (nationalism, popular rights, and the people's livelihood), scheduled for April 2011 at the Beijing Institute of Technology by the local Communist Youth League, was reported to have been abruptly cancelled.[11] While no reason was given, the authorities will have noticed that the "Arab spring" was developing fast and unpredictably at exactly the same time and were perhaps concerned to avoid any parallels being drawn.

Nor have wider public attitudes toward the 1911 revolution necessarily been straightforward. A July 2011 survey of over 15,000 people by Phoenix Television (Fenghuang dianshi 鳳凰電視), based in Hong Kong but with

7 http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64093/64387/13035695.html.
8 Zhongguo xinwenwang, 28 June 2011.
9 http://shop36274210.taobao.com; Zhongshan shangbao, 5 June 2011.
10 http://www.xhgmw.org/archive-49586.shtml.
11 John Chan, "Beijing cancels debate on 1911 revolution," *World Socialist Website*, 12 May 2011, http://www.wsws.org/articles/2011/may2011/chin-m12.shtml.

extensive broadcast exposure in the mainland, revealed some popular attitudes toward the question "What do you think is the main significance of 1911?" By far the most popular answer (54.1 per cent of respondents) was "the overthrow of the feudal Qing dynasty," although two replies combined ("the establishment of a republic" and "popularization of a republican ideal") totalled 28.7 per cent. Some 12.3 per cent declared that the revolution had not "changed the face of China, but started a tradition of violent revolutions."[12]

Also revealing was the question: "Why should we commemorate the 1911 revolution?" 27.2 per cent of respondents replied "for the purpose of work on unification" (other popular answers included "the need to carry on the revolutionary spirit of the martyrs" at 14.2 per cent, "the need to restore the truth of history," at 19 per cent and "the need to reflect on its gains and losses" for 5.4 per cent). Counterfactuals were also canvassed: some 20.4 per cent believed that without the revolution, a constitutional monarchy might have succeeded in China, but some 62.7 per cent either believed that "so-called constitutionalism" was nothing more than a hoax, or that the "corrupt" Qing dynasty had lost control of society, or else was simply too internally riven to allow reform to work properly. On the other hand, one revealing question suggests that 1911 still has symbolic potency. Asked to choose the most important from a variety of revolutionary events in 20th-century China, 29.5 per cent of questioners chose 1949, but 34.6 per cent chose 1911.[13]

1911 or 2011: The Past in the Present

The feeling in this public survey that 1911 is significant but hard to define is shared by many historians in China, much of whose debate about where to place that year in a revolutionary chronology and typology has had a distinctly contemporary flavour. Even within the PRC there are shades of opinion which are linked in part to the writer's closeness to Party bodies. In June 2011, Zuo Yuhe of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) wrote in the Party journal *Hongqi* (红旗, *Red Flag*) on "the successes and failures of the Xinhai revolution." His argument falls within the mainstream narrative of the CCP: the overthrow of the imperial system provided the conditions for China's capitalist modernization, but the revolutionaries failed to prevent Yuan Shikai 袁世凯 destroying the democratic system. Yet even here, Yuan ultimately could not prevent "democratic consciousness" spreading across the nation, so in the end, the Xinhai revolution "was not a failure."[14]

12 http://survey.news.ifeng.com/result.php?surveyId=8653, 18 July 2011. The survey is not explicit about its survey group, but its methodology strongly suggests that the respondents were based in the People's Republic of China.

13 *Ibid*.

14 Zuo Yuhe, "Xinhai geming de chenggong yu shibai" ("The successes and failures of the 1911 revolution"), *Hongqi wengao*, June 2011, p. 27.

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However, away from journals closely controlled by the Party, much of the commentary by historians seeks to find parallels with China's current situation, and there is a clear sense that 1911 and the Qing dynasty stand proxy for 1949 and the CCP. Of course, comparisons have their own dangers. One hundred years ago, many outside observers did feel that the Qing had, very late in the day, reformed itself sufficiently to survive. Two British writers, William Fullerton and Charles Wilson, wrote a glowing account of a "new China" being transformed by reforms.[15] The book's relevance was unfortunately diminished by its publication date of 1910; the late Qing regime that was being praised would disappear within months of the volume arriving in bookshops. The regime in the PRC is infinitely stronger than the late Qing in a variety of ways, but many of the accusations thrown at the Qing by historians – corruption, xenophobia and inability to engage with a truly mass politics – are mainstays of the criticism of the current administration. "Opening up and reform" is a term that can apply to the last years of the Qing as much as it does to the PRC in the Deng and post-Deng eras.

Two of the major questions are summarized by the historian Yang Tianshi 杨天石, based at the Institute for Modern History at CASS, an institution institutionally closer to the Party than most Chinese universities. Nonetheless, Yang's research is known for its innovative approach to a variety of previously accepted views on the Republican period, in particular his groundbreaking recent work based on Chiang Kai-shek's diaries, which gives a much more nuanced and positive view of the Nationalist leader than had been possible before the 1990s.[16] In one article, Yang suggests that there is still "no fixed verdict" on the 1911 revolution. He draws on Liu and Li's phrasing to characterize one of the key debates as the question of "farewell to revolution." Some critics argue that because of the destruction that marked the century of revolution that followed 1911, the revolution itself should not have taken place (the position taken by the Nanjing University students in the cross-Strait debate). This premise then raises the question of what the alternatives were, and whether the Qing dynasty could have saved itself through its constitutional reforms and the New Government reforms of 1902–11.[17]

Writing in *Liaowang* (瞭望, *Outlook*) magazine, an official publication aimed at elite readers, Yang is dismissive of the theory that the late Qing was capable of reform. "The effect of their learning overseas was questionable," he says of the officials sent to the West, adding: "I don't agree that revolution was unnecessary." The goal of reform of the political system, Yang continues, is to restrain

15 W.Y. Fullerton and C.E. Wilson, *New China: A Story of Modern Travel* (London: Morgan and Scott, 1910).

16 Yang Tianshi, *Zhoaxun zhenshi de Jiang Jieshi: Jiang Jieshi de riji jiedu (In Search of the Real Chiang Kai-shek: Interpreting Chiang's Diaries)* (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 2008).

17 Yang Tianshi, "Ruhe pingjia Xinhai geming reng wu dinglun" ("How should we assess the Xinhai revolution when there is still no fixed verdict?"), in *Zhonghua dushubao*, 15 April 2011, cited in www.xinhai.org/yanjiu/191103374.htm.

absolutism and transfer power to the wider population, "but the Qing did not make real efforts in this regard." Yang declares that the "Farewell to revolution" school came into being because there had been too many revolutions, and too much destruction, since the establishment of the Republic. "The task of modernizing the country has not been completed," he notes. "We are still engaged in the same piece of work as was the 1911 generation."[18] Yang's declaration that the revolution remains unfinished, and that contemporary development is part of a continuing direct trajectory from 1911, suggests, like Wang Hui, that the current era of reform should not be regarded as an endpoint in historical development.

The veteran historian Zhang Kaiyuan 章开沅, former president of the Central China Normal University (CCNU) in Wuhan goes further, using interviews not only to argue that the revolution remains unfinished, but rather to insist the legacy of 1911 is failure. Zhang has engaged with the 1911 revolution throughout his career, and was one of the first Chinese to address the event in a Western forum (at the University of Washington in 1979).[19] "I cannot say 'farewell to revolution,'" he has declared, adding "[t]en years ago, at an international conference, I announced that I would say farewell to the Xinhai revolution. But today, I can no longer do so."[20] His compulsion to return to the revolution lies in a deep disillusionment with the nature of the contemporary socio-political settlement. In another, earlier interview, Zhang had conceded that there had been some improvement in political participation over the past hundred years, but that overall, it was a cause for shame that there had been so little change, in particular in "individual consciousness" and that Sun Yat-sen's agenda of "people's rights" (*minquan* 民权) had not yet been fulfilled. Zhang declares that the best way to assess 1911 is not over a century, but over a 300-year period, including the century prior to the Xinhai revolution, and the century still to come (shades of Zhou Enlai's supposed reflection about the French Revolution). Zhang also provides a succession of revolutionary "liberations": he classes 1911 as the first, 1949 as the second, and Deng Xiaoping's reforms as the third (Wang Hui has also described the period 1978–89 as one of revolution). He then declares that China must now fight for a fourth liberation, which he characterizes as "the return of humanity (*renxing* 人性)." The interviewer seeks to clarify the term, asking whether he means "citizen rights" (*gongmin de quanli* 公民的权利). Zhang corrects him; without "humanity," the reform of any political system is likely to be "old wine in new bottles." When asked what the loss of humanity had meant in practice, Zhang specified the prioritizing of material things over spiritual, the stress on technology over liberal arts, and the collapse of social ethics. Zhang does not dismiss technology in its entirety, but stresses that it should co-exist with liberal

18 Yang Tianshi, "Xinhai geming bainian huiwang" ("Looking back at the hundred years since the Xinhai revolution"), *Liaowang*, 27 April 2011.

19 Kaiyuan Zhang, "A General Review of the Study of Revolution of 1911 in the People's Republic of China," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (1980), p. 525.

20 Zhang Kaiyuan, "Wufa gaobie geming" ("No way to say farewell to revolution"), interview with reporter Liu Wei, *Liaowang*, 17 May 2011.

values (*renwen* 人文), and take account of issues such as environmental protection. Too much growth, notes Zhang, can cause its own problems. Finally, he notes, people should not shoulder responsibilities just as Chinese citizens, but as citizens of the world.[21] This argument finds points of commonality both with Wang Hui's critique of neo-liberalism and Liu and Li's conception in *Farewell to Revolution*; the former, in terms of the loss of humanity that came from revolutionary terror (the post-1949 revolution), and the latter, in terms of a criticism of the domination of the market (the post-1978 revolution). Zhang's argument has little to do with the details of a bomb plot in Wuhan in October 1911. Yet, in linking this project to a series of "liberations" starting with Xinhai, Zhang Kaiyuan gives historical legitimacy to a very future-oriented project.

Other scholars in the PRC have widened the arena of discourse even further. One of the most intriguingly critical responses to the legacy of 1911 comes from the octogenarian liberal scholar Yuan Weishi 袁伟时. Yuan, who is attached to Sun Yat-sen (Zhongshan 中山) University in Guangzhou, has in recent years become famous (or from the authorities' point of view, notorious) for his condemnation of the simplistic nationalistic narratives that underpin the history textbooks in Chinese schools. An essay on this topic was the trigger for the shutdown in January 2006 of *Bingdian* (冰点, *Freezing Point*), the outspoken supplement to the *China Youth Daily*. Yuan's critique examined several of the important events of the late Qing period, particularly the burning of the Summer Palace in 1860 and the Boxer War of 1900, and condemns traditional historiography for its downplaying of Chinese complicity in the events of the period.[22] While the piece that caused such outrage during the *Bingdian* row did not discuss 1911 directly, Yuan's controversial engagement with late imperial history does provide context for comments he has made elsewhere on the Xinhai revolution.

Unlike Yang Tianshi and Zhang Kaiyuan, Yuan rejects the need for 1911 at all. He would have preferred the establishment of a constitutional system to revolution, and suggests that the consequences of 1911 were "financial collapse and warlordism." Yuan argues that a hundred years after the revolution, the Chinese "still don't have enough awareness of human rights." With irony, he declares: "If we struggle hard, we *may* recover the level we were at, at the start of the Republic." One of Yuan's responses is a very 21st century one, that QQ (the Chinese SMS, or short messaging service) should be used to spark public debate (an echo, perhaps, of the role of Liang Qichao's *Shibao* 时报, the newspaper that underpinned much reformist thought in the run-up to 1911).[23]

21 Zhang Kaiyuan, "Xinhai geming xu tansuo shangxia san bainian" ("We need to explore the three hundred years around the Xinhai revolution"), *Fenghuang wang zhuangao*, 8 October 2010.

22 A variety of reports from Chinese and western media, including details of Yuan Weishi's actual comments, can be found at http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20060126_1.htm.

23 Joan Judge, *Print and Politics: "Shibao" and the Culture of Reform in Late Qing China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

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Yuan argues that 1949 was a much more influential revolution. Even the sacrosanct figure of Sun Yat-sen comes in for a cool assessment: "Sun Wen was a revolutionary," he concedes, but aside from that, "he lacked any other aspects worth talking about."[24]

Yuan is not alone in his scepticism that any sort of liberatory project at all can be found in 1911. The senior Taiwan-based scholar, Zhang Pengyuan 張朋園 suggested that it is "inappropriate to exaggerate the significance of 1911; it wasn't that big a deal [*liaobuqi* 了不起], and I can't judge it very highly." Zhang believes that 1911 was the start of decades of chaos, and that it was not until Deng Xiaoping's era that China took the path that the late Qing reformer Liang Qichao had wanted.[25]

It is a commonplace that China's historians never discuss the past without an eye to the present. In a system where direct political control of history remains so strong, it is inevitable that they will do so. Nonetheless, it is striking that so many distinguished historians have drawn such a strongly negative, or at least sceptical, picture of China a century after 1911. Whether unfinished or failed, it is clear that few of them can say "farewell" to Xinhai with an easy conscience and that most see a direct trajectory from the politics of the late Qing to the politics of today.

Different 1911s

All of the historians above interpret the significance of 1911 in the context of 1949 and 1978. Yet in the past century, other historical actors have read the year's significance in the context of very different dates. By the middle of the 20th century, the dates most connected with 1911 were probably 1927 and 1937, even though they are rarely mentioned now. Yet the victory of the Nationalists (Kuomintang) under Chiang Kai-shek and the establishment of the regime in Nanjing in 1928 after the revolution of the previous year was underpinned by the belief that the regime was the fulfilment of the promise made by Sun Yat-sen in 1911, the return to a path from which the earlier revolution had deviated. Symbolically, the reburial of Sun Yat-sen on the Purple and Gold Mountain in Nanjing was the moment at which the correct turn on the revolutionary path was made.[26] The Nationalists even stamped the slogan "the revolution is not yet complete" on many of their documents to indicate their debt to 1911.

The legacy of 1911 was invoked even more frequently during a life-threatening event in the history of the Republic: the war against Japan from 1937 to 1945. Chiang Kai-shek was forced into rhetorical strategies that could justify a

24 Yuan Weishi, "Xinhai geming shi yi chang shengda de jiamian wuhui" ("The Xinhai revolution was one great masquerade"), Fenghuang wang zhuangao, 8 October 2010, http://blog.ifeng.com/article/8012723.html.

25 Zhang Pengyuan, "Kuada Xinhai geming bu heshi" ("It's not appropriate to exaggerate the significance of the Xinhai revolution"), Fenghuang wang zhuangao, 9 October 2010, http://news.ifeng.com/special/history/xinhaigeming99/content-0/detail_2010_10/09/2732740_0.shtml.

26 Henrietta Harrison, *The Making of the Republican Citizen: Political Ceremonies and Symbols in China 1911–1929* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), ch. 6.

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humiliating defeat, as his government abandoned the eastern seaboard of China. Until October 1938, the regime's military headquarters were at Wuhan, a city with particular resonance for the Nationalist government. As the battle for the city raged in the summer of 1938, Chiang declared that the fall of Wuhan would also be "a great spiritual loss," since the place had such strong connections to "revolutionary history," a very clear link of the regime's legitimacy to the topography of 1911.[27]

The later years of the war saw contestation for the legacy of the revolution with multiple claimants. The first half of 1940 saw two major attempts to define 1911. In "On New Democracy," published in January that year, Mao Zedong declared that the 1911 revolution had been the first stage of "a bourgeois-democratic" revolution and that it is "still unfinished and still demands great efforts," citing Sun Yat-sen's statement that "The revolution is not yet completed, all my comrades must struggle on."[28] Although an ideological challenge to Chiang's regime, it was clear that the CCP had at least to pay tribute to the heritage of the earlier revolution.

The spring of 1940 gave rise to another challenger also, and this one a more explicit inheritor of 1911. On 30 March 1940, Wang Jingwei 汪精卫 was installed as chairman of the "reorganized" Nationalist government that had been set up as a Japanese client government in eastern China. The regime's symbolism and purported legitimacy came from its association with Sun's revolutionary career. Wang himself had been an anti-Qing activist of note in the period before the Xinhai revolution, and his ideological journey in the three decades between 1911 and 1940 was long and complex, coloured by a whole raft of factors both political and personal. But his claim to power was as a Chinese nationalist who drew upon the legacy of Xinhai and Sun's subsequent revolutionary career, rather than a rejection of republican modernity (as could be seen in the rival client state of Manchukuo). The regime's newspaper, the *Zhonghua ribao* 中华日报, used the calligraphy of Sun himself on its front page. While the regime's Japanese sponsorship made claims of nationalist credibility hard to sustain, other nationalist leaders in the region (Ba Maw of Burma, Subhas Chandra Bose of India, and José Laurel of the Philippines), many of whom Wang met in Tokyo in November 1943 at the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Conference, were able to reconcile anti-imperialism with (temporary) acceptance of Japanese control.[29]

Our retrospective knowledge of Communist victory provides a revolutionary sequence that makes 1911 and 1949 the key dates (with perhaps 1966 and 1978

27 Chiang Kai-shek, "Fayang geming lishi de guangrong baowei geming genjudi de Wuhan" ("Protecting the revolutionary base of Wuhan with its glorious revolutionary history"), *Zongtong Jiang gong sixiang yanlun zongji* (Collected thought and opinions of President Chiang) (Taipei: Zhengzhong, 1956–59), p. 411.

28 Mao Zedong, "On New Democracy," in Stuart R. Schram, *Mao's Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings, 1912–1949* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), pp. 333–34.

29 R. B. Smith, *Changing Visions of East Asia, 1943–93: Transformations and Continuities* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), ch. 1.

providing other caesuras). But these were not the only possible genealogies of revolution. A stable post-war Nationalist state would have linked 1911 to 1927, and possibly 1945 (as the date of victory against Japan). If the Japanese empire had endured in Asia, then the Wang regime would presumably have linked 1911 to 1927 and then perhaps 1940 (though the need to argue continuity rather than change meant that the latter date might have been played down). However, few now see the Sino-Japanese War as a natural point of continuity from 1911, other than perhaps as another in a sequence of failures in the Chinese nationalist project. A historical connection to 1911 which was once immensely powerful now has little valency.

Yet even 1949, so long a fixed point in China's revolutionary trajectory, does now seem in question, if not necessarily in doubt. In these circumstances, the need for alternative pivotal points has become ever greater. 1911 has the distinct advantage of indistinctness: it was an accidental revolution whose causation is still in dispute, and this makes it more malleable in contemporary political usage.

The unanchored revolution

The Soviet film director Mikhail Chiaureli left something of a hostage to fortune with his 1952 film *The Unforgettable Year 1919*. Apart from Shostakovich's score, few today remember much about the picture or the "unforgettable" events of the Russian Civil War referenced in the title (not least since they were heavily fictionalized to allow Stalin a historically unfeasible starring role). "The Unforgettable Year 1911," in contrast, continues to have a place in popular Chinese historical understandings of the revolution even when its meaning is unclear. 1911 is an uncomfortable revolution because it sits, like 1905 in Russia or 1919 in Germany, as the precursor of a failed regime. However, it also still contains potential political energy because like those other revolutions, it seems to have resonance and significance in understanding successor regimes from the 1990s onward. This does not imply approval of those successor regimes; it is merely an observation that the eventual state formation, decades later, in Russia and Germany, looks a great deal closer to the immediate aftermath of the initial revolution than the radical regimes that followed in the medium term (the Bolsheviks, and the Nazis). 1911 seems to have more promise as the source of historical counterfactuals in 2011 than it did, say, in 1961 or even 1986 (the 75th anniversary).

1949 remains a very important turning point, and it would be immensely unwise to lose sight of just how different the Chinese polity became after that date, and remains to this day. Nonetheless, there has been a trend within the academy in recent years to cast the 1949 revolution as marking continuity as well as change.[30] In part, this is a product of the historical revisionism that

30 See, for instance, the essays in Jeremy Brown and Paul Pickowicz, eds., *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

marks the health of the field. It is also a response to an empiricist turn in the study of the history of the early People's Republic of China. As scholars examine the details of life in the first years of Mao's regime, along with revolutionary changes, they see many connections with the previously existing regime. In addition, many aspects of Maoist social change (for instance the *danwei* 单位 system) are seen to have their origins in the measures undertaken by the Nationalists in wartime China.[31]

In addition, the sense of continuity has lessened the idea that a "New China" emerged wholesale in 1949, and has thrust much more attention onto the Republican period that preceded it, and by extension, on 1911 as the originary point of that Republic.[32] The attention paid to 1911 suggests that there is still a strong feeling that "the revolution is not complete." In these circumstances, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is still interest in the meaning of the events that began in Wuhan one hundred years ago. If the events of a century ago can be injected, in retrospect, with a sense of forward narrative, then that may finally solve the most puzzling legacy of 1911: the fact that, a hundred years on, after Communist revolution, and rise to global status, some of China's problems of political instability, disillusioned elites, and social crisis still look remarkably similar to those that it faced when the plotters were discovered in Wuhan on 10 October 1911. The Chinese authorities have noticed with concern that the centenary year of Xinhai has also coincided with a string of revolutions in the Middle East; they may also have noticed, as have some participants in those events, that the overthrow of a regime does not always lead to a complete change of system or society.

In the end, despite the considerable attention being paid to 1911 in China this year, one must draw the conclusion that the event has become unanchored from any clear historical trajectory. The Xinhai revolution has achieved that most historically unusual of results: its meaning has become less, and not more obvious as time has gone on. Or perhaps it is just that when it comes to meaning, as Zhou Enlai may never have said, it is simply too soon to tell.

31 See for instance Mark Frazier, *The Making of the Chinese Industrial Workplace: State, Revolution, and Labor Management*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

32 See, for instance, the special edition of *The China Quarterly* (June 1997) on "Reappraising Republican China."