

# YUAN SHIKAI AND THE GRAND ORDERS OF CHINA

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## Overview

The Grand Merit Order (*Da Xun Zhang*, 大勋章) was founded by President Yuan Shikai on July 29, 1912 as China's highest decoration. China became a Republic following the 1911 Revolution that overthrew the Manchu rulers of the Qing Dynasty. However, 2100 years of imperial rule cast a long shadow over the new Republic, and this was evident in its honors.

The Grand Order was virtually identical to the Imperial Grand Order founded the previous year by the last Emperor Puyi. Astoundingly for a republic, the insignia featured the Twelve Symbols of Imperial Authority traditionally embroidered on the Emperor's dragon robes. In both its design and institution, the Grand Order was indelibly linked to the ambitions of one man, Yuan Shikai, the former Imperial strongman turned President, who betrayed two Emperors and finally the Republic.

## The Rise of Yuan Shikai

On a dusty summer day in June, 1916, a strange procession wound its way through the streets of Beijing before setting forth on a 450-mile journey to Xiangcheng in Henan Province. Mandarins in Qing imperial robes and lamas in high fringed hats mingled with foreign diplomats. Most resplendent were the warlords of the Republic in their sky blue uniforms with egret-plumed kepis and decorations. The man at the center of all this attention would have appreciated the contradictions, but Yuan Shikai (Figure 1) lay serenely oblivious in his catafalque.<sup>1</sup>

Yuan Shikai was born the son of a peasant farmer on September 16, 1859 in a village near Xiangcheng. It was a time of war. The Taiping Rebellion was at its most destructive with much of central China in rebel hands. The Miao Rebellion had the southwest in flames while the Nian Rebellion was devastating the north. At the same time, China was embroiled in the Second Opium War against Britain and France that would culminate in the sacking of Beijing and the burning of the Summer Palace.

In 1860 as the Nian rebels rampaged into central Henan, Yuan's family fled to the Yuan clan fortress. There, the son of the commanding general took to the boy and adopted him, welcoming him into a prominent military family giving him a network of powerful connections.



*Figure 1 Yuan Shikai (1859-1916) in the elegant, Westernized uniform of a Qing general. Born the son of a peasant, Yuan rose to high office in the Qing Empire before betraying the Dynasty to become President of the Republic of China. Backed by the Beiyang Army, he ruled as a military dictator but overreached when he proclaimed himself Emperor.*

As a young man, Yuan, stocky, powerfully-built with a head like a cannon ball, found riding and cleaving swords more rewarding than the dusty Confucian classics. After failing the lowest examination degree, Yuan turned his attention to the army. He travelled to nearby Shandong Province where a family friend put him in charge of training a brigade.

His subsequent rise was meteoric. At just 23 he helped settle a crisis in China's vassal Korea, postponing war with Japan. On the recommendation of Li Hongzhang, China's leading statesman of the late Qing period, Yuan was promoted by the Guangxu Emperor and awarded the coveted Peacock Plume. He returned to Korea and helped train the Hermit Kingdom's army. He stayed there for the next ten years.

Modernization of the Imperial army had begun in the latter part of the 19th century. The Beiyang or "Northern Ocean Army" was created by Li Hongzhang, China's leading

statesman of the late Qing Dynasty, as the centerpiece of a modern army.<sup>2</sup> However China's new army and navy were crushed by Japan in a short and bloody war in 1894-95. By a stroke of luck, Yuan had himself recalled from Korea shortly before the war. Yuan survived the fall of his patron, Li Hongzhang, and was appointed commander of the 4000-man New Army established as the nucleus of a modern Western-style military. He was just 36.

In the years that followed, the Guangxu Emperor intensified efforts to modernize the country. Sweeping changes were announced affecting government, the economy, the educational system and the military. The reforms reached a peak in 1898 with the "Hundred Days Reforms" when some 40 edicts were issued by the 27-year-old Emperor. Over the summer however, conservative Manchu princes and Han gentry alarmed at the increasingly radical reforms and threats to their traditional privileges appealed to the Empress Dowager Cixi who was in semi-retirement at the Summer Palace.

Fearing a palace coup, the Guangxu Emperor pleaded with Yuan to protect the Throne. Yuan however betrayed the reformers, and the Empress Dowager swept into the Forbidden City and resumed her regency. The leading reformers were executed, the reforms overturned, and her nephew, the Emperor, was banished to a lakeside island in the Imperial Park. He never forgave Yuan.

When the Boxer uprising erupted in Shandong Province, Yuan's troops brutally suppressed the Boxers who moved on to Beijing where they were welcomed by reactionary Manchu princes. China declared war on the foreign powers in June, 1900, but Yuan and the southern viceroys deftly ignored the court's pleas for reinforcements. At the same time, he took pains to demonstrate his loyalty by sending food, money and silks to the Empress Dowager and Emperor after they fled the capital.

The court returned in January of 1902, and China re-embraced the path of reform. After Li Hongzhang's death, control of the Beiyang Army passed to Yuan who was appointed the powerful Viceroy of Zhili Province (which included the Imperial capital Beijing). He expanded the Beiyang Army and founded the Baoding Military Academy that trained many of China's future military leaders, including Chiang Kai-shek.

On November 15, 1908, after ruling China for half a century, the Empress Dowager Cixi joined her ancestors at the age of 74. Her nephew, the Guangxu Emperor, had died just one day before her at the age of 36. He had been poisoned.<sup>3</sup> A three-year old boy, Puyi, son of the second

Prince Chun, ascended the throne as the Xuantong and became the last Emperor of China.

Rumours abounded as to Yuan's culpability. The last Emperor Puyi records an account of an old eunuch that the Emperor was "fairly well" the day before his death but fell seriously ill after taking a dose of medicine sent by Yuan.<sup>4</sup> A popular story was that the Emperor presented his half-brother Prince Chun with an edict with the words "Kill Yuan Shikai" written in vermilion ink.

Whatever the truth, the new regent Prince Chun dismissed Yuan from all his posts. Yuan kept his head but was forced to retreat to his private estate. For the next three years he maintained close contact with his former subordinates in the Beiyang Army, including his loyal lieutenant Duan Qirui.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Imperial Grand Order**

China's first Western-style order was the Order of the Double Dragon founded by the Guangxu Emperor in February 1882. The Double Dragon was originally intended as an award for foreign diplomats or foreigners working in China for whom traditional Chinese honors like the Peacock Plume or the mandarin rank and hat button were inappropriate. The award was only extended to Chinese citizens in 1908 at the request of the Qing Foreign Ministry and even then, only rarely.

Given its origins and history, it was felt that the Double Dragon was no longer adequate to meet the needs of China as a modern nation. A new system of national honors was needed that could serve diplomatic protocol and, more importantly, the needs of Chinese citizens including the Emperor.

On April 2, 1909 the boy Emperor Puyi (or rather the regent Prince Chun) directed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Army Ministry and the Administration Bureau to develop a new system of awards to replace the Order of the Double Dragon. Two years later on March 20, 1911 the Emperor approved the establishment of five new awards.

These new awards were: the Grand Precious Order (*Da Bao Zhang*, 大宝章, also known in the West as the "Grand Order of the Throne") intended for the Emperor; the Orders of the Red Dragon and the Yellow Dragon (for members of royal families) and the Orders of the Blue Dragon and the Black Dragon (for nobles and high officials). The first four were in one class only, while the Black Dragon was in eight classes.<sup>6</sup>

## Design of the Imperial Grand Order

Illustrations of the Imperial Grand Order and the Colored Dragons were contained in a book titled *Xun Zhang Tu* (“Pictures of Orders”) or *Ordres Imperiaux de Chine*. The book was printed for the Qing Government by the royal



**Figure 2: Obverse of the Imperial Grand Order sash badge (from *Ordres Imperiaux de Chine*). The Twelve Symbols of Imperial Authority are clearly visible as are the circle of pearls bordering the center medallion. (www.gmic.co.uk)**

press at Vienna and illustrated with color drawings of the Great Order and the Colored Dragons.<sup>7</sup>

According to the illustrations, the sash badge of the Imperial Grand Order was a star comprising two rings of eight rays, one blue and one red, for a total of 16 points (Figure 2). The center medallion was bordered with pearls and depicted the Twelve Symbols of Imperial Authority on a background of Imperial yellow. The reverse medallion was inscribed with the characters *Da Bao Zhang* (“Great Precious Order”) in Chinese Seal Script (Figure 3). The breast star is the badge mounted on a star corpus composed of eight groups of ascending diamond-cut rays (Figure 4). The sash ribbon was Imperial yellow.

### Symbolism

The Grand Order featured the Twelve Symbols of Imperial Authority. According to the *Book of Rites*, one of the Five Classics of the Confucian canon, “Twelve is



**Figure 3: The reverse of the sash badge of the Imperial Grand Order. The center medallion bears the name of the Order (*Da Bao Zhang*, 大宝章) in Chinese seal script (www.gmic.co.uk)**



**Figure 4: Obverse of the Imperial Grand Order star (from *Ordres Imperiaux de Chine*). The star is the sash badge superimposed on an eight-pointed star with diamond-cut rays (www.gmic.co.uk).**

the number of Heaven.” Twelve distinctive symbols, the Twelve Symbols of Imperial Authority, were traditionally used by the Emperor as the Son of Heaven (*tianzi*) and embroidered on his official dragon robes.<sup>8</sup>

The Twelve Symbols were: the sun; the moon; the stars